

THRICE

FICTION™

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THRICE FICTION

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RW Spryszak, Editor

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THRICE PUBLISHING NFP, a private corporation registered in the state of Illinois, reaches outside the mainstream to publish the work of selected writers whose efforts, we feel, need to be seen. It's flagship publication, **THRICE FICTION**, has been a platform for presenting this work alongside exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE ARTS** provides design and editing services to writers at large.

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shrouding of a lesser man by Carlos Franco-Ruiz



Thrice 22 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

I sometimes wonder how it is people can't see what I see. He is obviously a manipulative liar. He has an elastic sense of morality that applies to everyone but himself. And every time he speaks his dripping, overbearing and glib mendacity is large, obvious, and unmistakable. And yet there they go, his sycophants and cultists, blind to all his faults as much as they are voluntarily unaware of his propensity for adolescent belligerence. They justify anything he does and never fail to rewrite the truth to fit their own perspective and stilted worldview. Why they can't see this as I do is unknown to me. But mark my words. One day the people of Eritrea will rise and get rid of Isaias Afewerki once and for all. Just you wait and see.

Haha. Bet you thought I was talking about Putin.

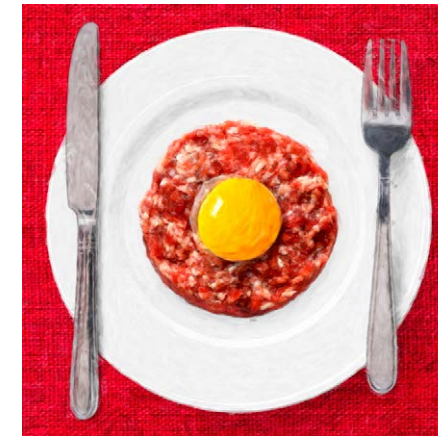
In any case here is the April 2018 edition of Thrice Fiction Magazine, that bulwark of indefensible fiction. We have some returners and some new faces. A smaller cast this time but with larger stories. Like a handful of survivors with big ears. Every one of the fiction works here, as is usually the case, was unsolicited by us and freely sent in an open submission.

Come to think of it I hate the word "submission" when used to denote sending stories off for an editor's consideration. In these times of crypto-fascism and the uncertainty of the future of the Horn of Africa, "submission" has taken on an odious connotation. Yet "wannabees" is certainly far worse. And if you use "propitiations" it kind of takes away from the whole point made in the very first place.

So, I will just point out that there is an iguana on the tile roof and pretty soon you will forget the question altogether. This is obviously the smartest way to go and a prerequisite for obtaining and holding power.

What did I mean by that, you ask?

Oh. Lookit the iguana!



A Silly Woman

Brandon French

She had been a great beauty in her day, a statuesque blonde with large, olive-brown eyes, broad shoulders and spectacular teeth, and like a celebrated building that had fallen into disrepair but still retained its aura of glamour, she stood out among the drab and dumpy, mostly female seniors in the Ochsner Lifelong Learning's 20th Century American lit class, I among them. But I did my best to find seating as far away from Gloria as possible, especially when she patted the empty seat beside her and beckoned me with her thousand-watt smile. She reminded me of a cobra who mesmerizes onlookers with her sinuous dance, her powerful muscles and vertebrae contracting until she makes her deadly strike.

In an effort to lower my visibility, I limited the times I raised my hand to three an hour. To take more turns when I was a retired UC Berkeley English professor who had already taught, and in some instances written books about, the writers we were discussing, would have been vainglorious. It might also have seemed like I was competing with the teacher, a pleasant, reasonably competent young woman with sparse red hair and no chin. But Gloria exercised no comparable restraint. Everything she read reminded her of something else she had read or heard about or seen on television or in a movie and she presented the similarities, mostly invisible to the rest of us, with ecstatic certainty, waving one of her long, now flabby arms as if she had just unearthed a pair of conjoined Egyptian mummy twins.

The teacher did her best to massage Gloria's assertions into something resembling insight. "Yes, Gatsby's green light might have been an allusion to Joyce's Dublin, I suppose, and it's true that Fitzgerald and Joyce were in Paris around the same time. But do you think Fitzgerald might also have been using the green light as Gatsby's beckoning invitation to Daisy to cross the water from East Egg to his mansion in West Egg where he awaited her?"

"No, I think it's the Irish thing. They were both Irish, right? Joyce and Fitzgerald?"

I usually sat between Claudia and Natalie, two lively black women I'd befriended in the Music of Motown seminar, but today Natalie was late and before I could stop Gloria, she slid into the empty seat on my right.

"You're so smart," she whispered, smiling at me with her neon teeth.

"Oh, well, no," I said, attempting modesty.

"I made a bet with myself. I bet that you were a retired high school English teacher."

"College," I said. *Why the hell did I need to correct the record?*

"Then you must have a Masters Degree."

"Doctorate," I mumbled. I was disgraceful.

"I'd love to pick your brain," Gloria said.

I had a disturbing image of her parting my hair with her manicured lavender nails and plunging a lobster fork into my skull.

"Can we have lunch after class?"

Think fast, I pleaded with myself, but I couldn't come up with anything good. *I'm having root canal this afternoon. I'm helping a homeless man relocate?*

"I only eat raw meat at lunch," I lied.

"Great. I love steak tartare."

I'll have to admit that Gloria had led an interesting life. She abandoned her second husband Harold and her 16-year-old son Mansfield (not his) in Boston and took off for Paris with a Frenchman named Bertrand, a passionate lover who wanted to watch her have sex with other women.

"Did you do it?" I asked, uncertain how I'd feel if she said yes.

"Yes and no," she answered coyly, popping the last bite of raw sirloin into her mouth.

I tried to imagine what *yes and no* looked like naked.

After that first lunch, Gloria regaled me with offers and opportunities. Movies, plays, dinners, breakfasts, museums, the beach, the zoo, street fairs, and cultural events at the downtown library. I said ‘no’ more often than ‘yes,’ although my dance card wasn’t exactly filled. But it had been a long time since I’d been wooed so passionately, by anyone. And Gloria gossiped entertainingly about her many friends, although she didn’t actually seem to have any. I began to feel as though I’d been kidnapped by a lonely princess who needed a commoner to play with. I also imagined her having a thick address book blackened by the countless crossed-off names of my predecessors.

Gloria gradually unveiled the story of her childhood, a series of harrowing violations that she narrated robotically. Gloria’s mother abhorred sex and offered her beautiful five-year-old daughter to her husband as an alternative. But her mother was also cruelly jealous of Gloria and blamed her for her father’s perfidies. “Why don’t you stop him?” she demanded. “You’re just a little whore.”

Gloria said her mother would regularly lock herself in her bedroom and refuse to come out for hours. “I’d lay in the hallway outside her room sobbing and beg her to forgive me, but she wouldn’t open the door.”

“I think your parents were both mentally ill,” I said. “Yes, I suppose,” Gloria agreed, almost dreamily, “but I loved them so very much. I even ironed my father’s underwear,” she added, as if it were a tender memory.

Gloria wanted to know about my life, too, certain, she said, that it was “just as interesting as” hers. (It wasn’t.) But I didn’t want to disclose too much – depressed lawyer-father, neurotic school teacher-mother, the divorce when I was nine, the marriage to her next husband when I was fourteen, my parents’ deaths in their sixties, both from cancer, my endless education, and a string of lovers but no marriages. *Enough!* I had the uneasy feeling that Gloria would hold whatever I told her hostage, using it to *own* me in some nefarious way. Because it wasn’t the first time a silly woman had attempted to swallow me alive.

As we were walking to our cars one morning after a two-hour impressionist painting seminar, Gloria’s face darkened like a storm-threatened sky. “My mother used to tell me that I was stupid,” she said. “That’s why our Ochsner classes are so important to me. They’ve showed me how smart I really am.”

Oh, Jesus, I thought. I couldn’t bear to look at her, my harsh assessment of her intelligence seeming unforgivably cruel. But it didn’t alter my opinion. Gloria loved the *process* of learning but there was almost no evidence that she actually *learned* anything. One time at lunch, she regaled me with the wonders of her existentialism teacher, how he ‘blew her mind’ (I pictured an AK 13) with his

brilliance.

“What does he say about existentialism?” I asked. “I’m curious to know his take on it.”

“Oh, there’s so much –” Gloria crooned, looking past me as if the teacher were standing behind me in the restaurant. “I – I just can’t put it into words.”

Little by little, my impatience with Gloria grew. I hated how she’d tell me what she *wished* I would say, or the way she *wished* I would say it, as if she were trying to program a robot.

“Maybe you should send me a script, Gloria. You can be my screenwriter and I’ll read the lines.”

“I just wish you’d speak to me more lovingly,” she said. “You can be very harsh, Jackie.”

When I told her I hated *LaLa Land*, a movie she’d recommended with gushing adoration, Gloria grilled me like a defense attorney, determined to convince me of its merits. It was as if a difference of opinion threatened the mind meld with me that she craved.

Why was I so angry lately, she asked. *Why didn’t I return her phone calls? Her emails?*

“I do return them,” I said with a snarl.

“But you take your own sweet time.”

“Yes! Because it *is* my own sweet time. My! Time!”

Okay, okay, she said, placating me. “I’m sorry I’m such a pain the ass.”

But this was merely a preview of coming attractions. One Wednesday afternoon, I received a frantic phone call from Gloria, who was incarcerated in the Beverly Hills jail. She’d been arrested at Neiman-Marcus for shoplifting a pair of emerald earrings. *Shoplifting!* Could I call her son Mansfield in Connecticut and ask him to wire \$500 for the bail bond?

“Why don’t you call him yourself?” I demanded.

“Puleeze, Jackie.”

“I despise her,” Mansfield told me after he agreed to PayPal the money. Even before I could say thank you, he hung up on me.

I never told Gloria what he’d said, of course. I was sure she already knew how he felt.

This shoplifting episode made Gloria’s dependence on me even more evident, which increased my anxiety exponentially. It reminded me of a celebrated old French film, *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, in which a man rescues a bum who’s fallen into the Seine and finds himself responsible for the fellow’s life from then on.

“I’ve been diagnosed with Bi-polar Disorder,” Gloria explained as I was driving her to her car, which was still parked in the Neiman-Marcus lot from the day before. “Shoplifting is one of the symptoms of mania.”

“You mean you’ve done this before?”



“Oh, yes,” she said nonchalantly. “But not for several years.”

The light turned green but the car in front of me didn’t move, the driver no doubt texting. “It’s green!” I shouted, honking my horn. “That means *go!* - not

Irish.”

“Are you making fun of me?” Gloria asked, her eyes wide as owls.

“What are you talking about?” I said, suddenly recalling that Gloria was the source of my little Gatsby joke. “Of course I’m not.”

The next month was uneventful. After a psychiatrist testified to Gloria’s medical condition, she got off with a year’s probation. But the day after Thanksgiving, I received a phone call from Gloria’s neighbor Merriam informing me that Gloria was in St. John’s hospital. Apparently she had overdosed on Lorazepam (which Gloria persistently mispronounced Lorzapan), falling asleep at the wheel and crashing into the rear fender of another car. For the next four weeks, the doctors tried to detox her from benzos and get her regulated on a potent antidepressant cocktail. They also persuaded her to submit to a course of electroshock therapy, which left Gloria even more addled than usual.

“I’m having a terrible time remembering things,” she said apologetically, fiddling anxiously with the tie on her bathrobe.

“Maybe that’s a blessing,” I said.

The end of our relationship arrived not long afterward, for a reason as silly as Gloria herself. I hadn’t heard from her for four days in a row, so I called her neighbor Merriam to do a welfare check.

“Oh, she’s fine,” Merriam said, “but now she has green nails.”

“Green nails?” *Was that a symptom of some new medical problem?*

“I told her to act her age and stop trying to look like a teenager, so now she’s not speaking to me.”

“The green is from nail polish?” I asked, cracking a smile.

“Yes, and now her fingers looks like lizards.”

One hour later, I received an irate phone call from Gloria.

“You had no right to call Merriam,” she said.

“I was worried about you,” I said, caught off guard by her indignation. “What do you mean, I had no right.” I felt myself suddenly heating up like a teakettle.

“Merriam is a meddler and I don’t want her involved in

my private life,” Gloria said.

“Then why the hell did you give her my phone number a month ago when you ended up in the hospital?”

“That’s not the point.”

“It *is* the point. That woman seems to genuinely care about you, Gloria, and there isn’t a long line of people who do.”

“How dare you say that!”

“I’m just telling you the truth.”

“Fuck you,” Gloria said. The vulgarity sounded odd coming from her mouth. Whatever Gloria was, she had never been vulgar before.

“Same to you,” I said and hung up on her, surprised to see that my hands were shaking. *You should be relieved,* I told myself. *Good riddance,* I said. And then I felt a wave of bitterness. *After all I’d done for her, all the inconvenience, all the support, what an ingrate!* But there was nothing surprising about this sharp U-turn, it always happened with people like Gloria. I was just the latest deletion in her virtual address book.

Months passed. Classes ended and new ones began. I was especially fond of the one called “Politics, Schmolitics!” which was packed with seniors needing to vent. But Gloria didn’t show up for this class, nor my two others, “The Play’s the Thing,” and “Bette Davis Eyes.”


As I was leaving for the day, I spotted Dylan, the program administrator, on his way to the men’s room.

“Hey, D, have you seen Gloria Dennis lately? I haven’t run into her since the summer.” The truth was I thought she might have died. Had I secretly believed that she couldn’t live without me?

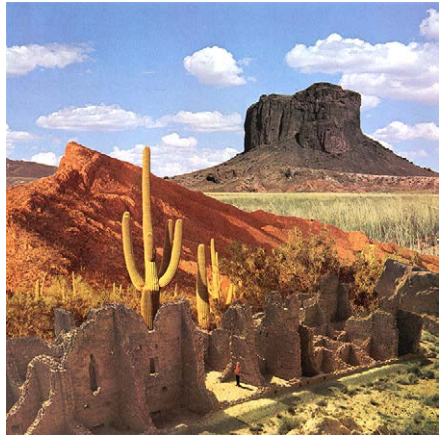
“Oh, she’s fine,” Dylan said, “flitting around the hallways just like always. Want me to say hello for you?”

I hesitated for a moment, caught between relief and dismay. Those unforgettable optic white teeth flashed at me like high beams.

“No,” I said, feeling my face turn red and hot as a bad sunburn. “No, no,” I added with more force, as if, despite everything, there was still a slim possibility of my saying yes. 🙄



BRANDON FRENCH is the only daughter of an opera singer and a Spanish dancer, born in Chicago sometime after The Great Fire of 1871. She has been (variously) assistant editor of *Modern Teen Magazine*, a topless Pink Pussycat cocktail waitress, an assistant professor of English at Yale, a published film scholar, playwright and screenwriter, Director of Development at Columbia Pictures Television, an award-winning advertising copywriter and Creative Director, a psychoanalyst in private practice, and a mother. Fifty-five of her stories have been accepted for publication by literary journals and anthologies, she’s been nominated twice for a Pushcart, and she has a published collection of poetry entitled *Pie*.



The Descent of Man

Lara Navarro

-1- DARWINIAN FALLACY

We were friends once. Scabby-kneed, blunt claws, home-scissored hair – bred from the same stock, carved from the same bone. We’d speed down the 95, play hide and seek in the desert, fuck in abandoned sun-scorched cars. Rusty was the alpha, charming and snarling and missing a few teeth, the kind of carnivore that played with his prey. We were all enamoured with him and we were all afraid of him and it wasn’t until the boy died that we started to wonder if maybe we’d been the prey all along.

After the constable found the body, Ruby-Jean couldn’t stop finding dirt mingled with her blood. Kenneth wouldn’t say the boy’s name out loud, wouldn’t acknowledge that they had grown up together. JJ caught sight of his face in a splintered mirror, and saw the same face he’d always seen.

We all made ugly choices. Started stalking each other in the shadows of the chronic summer, exchanging power plays with human-like attentiveness.

We used to hunt in a pack. We ran wild in the desert. Threw bowie knives at grasshopper mice. Hit them through the throat each time. But I don’t think we were ever friends.

-2- ‘NEXT GAS: 90 MILES.’

“Smouldering remains of a fire,” was the namesake of Embertown, Nevada, and it was fitting – the miners who settled there sixty years earlier must have assumed from the swallowing sky and uninhabited expanses of endless desert that this land must have been the surviving cadaver of some vicious inferno.

Children were born wild and hungry, sharing our cardboard cradles with our juvenile mothers, who nursed us only until we could brave the elements alone. The year was 1967, air thick with the sweat of struggle for existence

– in an animal kingdom of roughly a thousand identical white, poor, uneducated creatures, the food chain was soldered only by our free-for-all battle for dominance, propagated by the sole resource we had available to us – the hunt. The threat of attack, of the ousting of status, stalked the townspeople like a shadow. It was a never ending Open Season. It was a persistent hunt for opportunities to exhibit one’s own strength. Embertown was one isolated, Godforsaken cesspool of ignorance, depravity bleeding over morals, sex bleeding over love, and power bleeding over everything.

-3- FAHRENHEIT 109°

Hunger like the dried-up basin. Hunger like three pennies short. A broken pump in the gas station, leaking oil in the street. The neon Super 8 sign, the blind man who worked behind the desk. Hunger like our adobe houses, torn mattresses filled with fruit flies and desert rats and snakeskins. The two-hour bus ride to the county high school. Turning ghost towns into whorehouses. Collecting scrap metal out in the desert, hoping to sell it for something, anything, a penny. Hunger like too many pennies short. 47 names on a dotted line, all followed by Embertown. Teachers fudging their attendance records so the school wouldn’t lose county funding. Praying to the Saint of Mangy Dogs, because even the preacher knew God was never here. Doing unspeakable things in messy trailers to savage, drooling men. Hunger like a coyote ribcage. Hunger like a penny wedged between each bone. Kenneth and I at Hank’s Diner, because it was open at night and had a light on the front porch. Because there was no public lighting of any kind – “Embertown – unincorporated” meant there was nothing public, no sewer system, no water system, no law except for a drunken constable. Kenneth and I out the front of Hank’s Diner with a hunger we didn’t have the influence to do anything about, and Kenneth saying, “I never thought I’d live this long,” and me saying, “But yer only eighteen,” and him saying, “Exactly.”

-4- THE ALPHA MALE

Every June, Embertown’s only gas station would pour a winter’s supply of oil drippings out onto the gravel path. It would seep into the sand, poison the desert shrubs, collect dust and spread the smell that would last all year long. The air, thick and sticky, always carried the unmistakable stench of gasoline and piss. You could venture out into the desert as far as you liked – and we did, there was nothing else to do – and the smell still lingered, ten miles out of town. It got in our pockets. It got in our hair.

But Russell Strickland always smelled of blood.

He had chronic nosebleeds, broken his nose and reset it off-kilter ten too many times. Blood would cake on his face, around his jaw and crooked-grin like some perverse birthmark that would crackle and flake off like a rattlesnake shedding its skin. Greyson used to pester him about it – Greyson, who now worked in the post office, Greyson, who had been the leader before Rusty, who Rusty would mouth off about when his back was turned and drag his name

through the mud. Greyson, who didn’t look right anymore, not after Rusty took a swing at him with an empty bottle – Greyson used to pester Rusty about his bleeding nose, asked him if he was soft, and Rusty would only grin at him the same way he did now before he smacked one of us for getting caught acting bigger than him.

Rusty was crouched on the hood of Paul Rodriguez’s truck, squinting ahead, taking another swig from a bottle of whiskey.

There were seven of them – Rusty; Paul Rodriguez, the border bunny who traded his car for a place in the group; Harvey and Christopher, two mucus-like lumps of muscle; JJ, the lone wolf; Kenneth, Rusty’s faithful lapdog; Drew, the runt of the litter.

They were out at the gas station, watching for Otis’ ghost as they often did when there was little else to do. Two years prior, Otis got himself drunk on gasoline and then set himself on fire. (“Smart guy,” Drew had told Kenneth bitterly, sitting out on a curb with the bruises any Embertown child with a parent was sure to sport. “Wish I was man enough.”). They’d been searching for his burning ghost ever since.

Whenever someone emerged from the thick dust-fog, Rusty would smirk as the others tossed rocks and kicked sand, howling and jeering and marking their territory.

“List’n, give us what ya got in that plastic there and we’ll let ya through with no scrapes.”

“Aw, c’mon, we’s just havin’ some fun!”

“Gimme a little somethin’ and maybe I won’t poke out your baby’s blue blue eyes.”

“Ya headed to the bar? Tell me if ya see my old man. Owes me a dollar, he does.”

They puffed out their chests. Bared their teeth. Embertown’s pecking order was tenuous, dependent on power and status in a place where violence was the only way to get it. And Rusty and his boys always made sure to assert that they were at the apex. That was what Rusty had promised them: power. If Kenneth, scrawny and malnourished, was walking alone down Main Street, it was certain someone would have him pinned against the ground, looking for a fight to prove themselves. Or Harvey, impulsive and stupid, always ready for attack, no doubt to be caught in a cloud of dust, brawling with a broken glass bottle poised at his throat.

But Rusty. If they were with Rusty, no one would bother them. He was only twenty-two but people were afraid of him: his sly grin, the hyena laugh, the wild blue eyes. He was remorseless. He was violent. He understood weakness: if he couldn’t see one in you, he would invent one and use it, twist it, bend you to his will, smack you and kick you and degrade you while everyone else watched. He spent years turning the group against Greyson so that when he had him weak, when he noticed the barely-there limp that Greyson had been sporting for those past few days, he could challenge him, oust him as alpha. Rusty knew how to play the game, and Rusty knew how to win.

So they’d be sitting on the hood of Paul’s car looking for ghosts of friends who hadn’t really been friends, or maybe

stealing beer from the amenities truck, or maybe do a little drinking and a little screwing back behind Hank’s bar. But everything was done with a backwards glance at Rusty for approval.

Kenneth Ledbetter was leaning against the shattered headlight, his growl the deepest, his throw the longest, all intended for exhibition. He’d turn, panting, to his master on the hood of the car, spittle dangling from his mouth, eyes wide and adoring, desperate for reward.

Rusty turned to him when the dust-fog failed to produce any more playthings. “You – how’s yer sister?”

“Fine,” Kenneth beamed. “I can go fetch her.”

The other boys smirked.

If there were three things every person in town had in common, it was poverty, drinking, and sex. Lord knows there was nothing else to do. And all that the girls were good for was the sex. It didn’t seem to any of Rusty’s boys that they served any other function.

Perhaps this was why Embertown was the way it was – a dying town that just would not die, as long as girls kept having babies. They were a nuisance in this sense, replicating themselves and hoping dumbly the ‘father’ would assist. Most of us Embertown kids were fatherless. We all knew Rusty, for one, was responsible for an uncertain number of grimy infants often seen sitting out on the side of the dirt road.

The boys tolerated the company of three girls, each of which served her own purpose and was disposed of once she grew boring. Dolly, Kenneth’s older sister, was the beauty; Ginger was the whore; and Ruby-Jean, the bitch. Each played their role as best they could. Dolly embraced the staring, the lolling tongues, made herself available wherever and whenever to Rusty’s whims. Ginger was not a beauty, but she-offered herself readily in exchange for any semblance of affection, a little girl so desperate to be loved sometimes her shoulders shook with it. They kept her on a leash, tied her to a lamppost, and forgot that they’d left her there until they needed her.

But Ruby-Jean was something else.

She was all hard lines and angles, bony ribs and perfect, pointed teeth. Ruby-Jean was not the fittest, the strongest, the most beautiful, but she was the cruellest, the cleverest. She was harsh like one of Rusty’s boys, but dangled the sexuality of her own girlhood to maintain the upper hand. Rusty didn’t care if we all had a go with Dolly – but Ruby-Jean was untouchable. She’d sunk her claws into Rusty’s back, and it seemed he was always picking bits of her nails from beneath his skin. Seventeen years old, easily the youngest of us all, but she could smell fear better than any blood hound, find weakness even in the godlike mountains of the Nevada desert. She let Rusty claim her in exchange for safety and status, and would dance out of his reach as soon as he grew bored. She allowed herself to be prey; she proclaimed Open Season and let him hunt her down, use her flesh as a trophy. In return, she was his prize – the only girl in Embertown no one dared touch. And when she sensed him growing distracted, arrogant, she instigated the hunt once more. She’d take off into the desert, the tantalizing smell of raw meat in her wake, knowing all too well he’d pick up her scent and track her until she was back like the head of a mule deer on his trailer wall.

“Do ya want me to go get Dolly?” Kenneth prodded. He never got a response. Rusty’s attention was diverted at some perceived slight to his own character, squinting at Harvey with barely-veiled irritation.

“Kenneth. You and me and... Drew, and... Christopher. Let’s go. Old Jeb reckons he saw a white mule deer in the valley.”

Kenneth and the others scrambled off the car desperately, hearts thrumming with the excitement of being chosen. JJ, Paul and Harvey attempted to disregard the blow, but before the other boys had even left the station, the three were bickering amongst themselves, all guttural growls and accusations.

That was how Rusty ruled. Thrust weakness upon the others to ensure they were always lower. Beat. Praise.

Divide.
Conquer.

-5-
TEETH: A LOVE STORY

i.
Rusty cracked open a coyote’s ribcage, scooped out the heart, left the corpse to rot in the bathtub. Ruby-Jean would never admit it, but she was afraid of him.

ii.
The constable found the body in the channel four days later, when the water was filthier than usual. Ruby-Jean inspected a slash in her thigh, watched as dirt bled out from her open wound. Her blood seemed filthier than usual, too. She imagined lying in the bathtub with the dead coyote, Rusty cracking her chest open too and finding her heart all shrivelled and dirty and no good. The thought made her sneer, gnash her perfect teeth.

Rusty stumbled into the room, bloody nose and all. He bought a bowie knife, cut into Ruby-Jean’s back to make sure it was good and smeared red on the floorboards. Hours later, he threw it at the wall, hit the door frame each time. Ruby-Jean waited for him like she waited for the end. She didn’t cry. She never did.

iii.
One day, they went out in Paul’s truck, just the two of them. Ruby-Jean smoked out the window, ashes on her sundress. They sat on that desert boulder and drank until their throats burned like the orange sand. They ripped the heads off lizards until it got dark.

iv.
The beginning wasn’t any kinder. 5AM. Outside Ronald’s General Store by the trailer park. I was waiting by

the bus stop, back when we both went to school. Ruby-Jean was fourteen and Rusty was the father of her sister’s baby, smoking on the curb with no shirt on and he was bleeding and he was drunk and his snarl was sharp and silver and Ruby-Jean imagined he was some savage king. He was watching her like a ripe little piece of fruit and a nectarine fell out of her pocket and rolled to him and he picked it up and took a bite, juice dripping from his mouth.

“Hey little girl.”

v.
Rusty liked her bite, her full set of teeth. He liked to gnaw her neck. He liked to choke her, yank her hair, push her down until she speckled with blue, he dreamt of gutting her like he did the coyote. Rusty liked her eyes too.

vi.
“Ruby-Jean?”
“Mm?”
“Did... did ya see him?”
“Yeah. He was all... broken.”
“Yeah.”
“What did he say to ya? Just before?”
“Some shit ‘bout nothin’. Mumblin’ somethin’ ‘bout Otis and Cindy and the ghosts.”
“Oh.”
“Better off dead.”
“Maybe we all are.”

An hour later, he slammed her jaw into the floor, nearly knocked out every single one of her perfect teeth.

vii.
Rusty had a sun dried, runt coyote in the bathtub, and Ruby-Jean was outside the door soaking in the delicious, rank smell of festering meat.

He was skinning the creature, leaving scraps of flesh on the floor, drunk from the heat, drunk from the whiskey, drunk from the power and the blood on his hands. 🐾



Joel in Our Souls

Ellaree Yeagley

SIX PAIRS OF USED RUNNING SHOES UP IN A TREE

Used to be we gazed up at Joel’s face while he hovered in perpetual motion instead of the other way around. Those were happier days. He was warm, kinetic perfection. He was our reason for existing, one-to-one, shoe-to-foot, all together producing a perfect machine. Now we watch him trudge laboriously up the hill, small and stiff, a broken toy. Despite everything, he’s smiling. Loose beers ricochet off one another inside the plastic bag that dangles from his forearm crutch. His hair is shaggier than we’ve ever seen, but his arms are solid—they, at least, are exactly as we remember.

The breeze picks up, dizzying us. Those happier times were windy, too. Always windy, but a linear kind of wind, a straight line that bowed respectfully at our approach. Now it spins us into wild, lopsided orbit. Only after we find equilibrium do we see beneath us the drab, sponge-toed orthotic that sheathes Joel’s flesh foot. What’s left of his other leg ends in a rubber

cap the size of a bathtub plug, and it makes us so sad for him. And us.

Our new landlord, Clare, sprints forward and carefully untangles the beer bag. Together, he and Joel walk the trampled path to the fire pit, already piled high with a teepee of lit kindling. The fire spits dangerously close to the wooden bench where they will sit and maybe reclaim some of that old ease once the sun sets. “Voy-lah!” says Clare in his hillbilly French. He swings his beer arm in an arc wide enough to accommodate our new proportions. Joel’s eyes go a little watery when he looks up at us, and we see that he still cares.

CLARE GIVES BROKEN THINGS NEW LIFE

Joel looks up at his sneakers dangling from the big ol’ mobile I made like he just watched a buddy step on a landmine. It is a beautiful piece, probably among my very best, and it looks like a goldurn celestial vision in my oak tree.



LARA NAVARRO is a starving artist type with a penchant for the dark and twisty. She is pursuing a double major in Creative Writing and Media and Communications at the University of Melbourne, hoping to one day be able to afford a rood with a writer’s salary. She is an alum of CSSSA and John Hopkins’ Centre for Talented Youth, recipient of the Enid Miller memorial prize, a California Arts Scholar, and has been published in *Literary Orphans*, *Moonsick Magazine* and *Above Water*.

I took my time with the soldering and the measurements. Usually I don't mind a fair amount of asymmetry in my art, but this one needed to be perfect.

"Hand me one of those Newcastles, Clare," Joel says to me, and I can see him swallowing and swallowing, and I can tell he's trying not to cry.

"Nah, those are all for me," I say. Got any food in your belly? Good." And then I tell him flat out, "Tonight, you're going to eat some mescaline—just a little bit—and you're gonna work some shit out in my sweat lodge."

He's not happy about it at first. I can see it in his eyes; he'll try to stall until he can come up with what he feels is a solid argument against it. Finally, he says, "Clare, why do you even have a sweat lodge? I never wanted to start an argument, but I've got to say it now: it is totally offensive."

"Offensive to who?"

"Uh, Native Americans, for starters."

"Now you know I've got Lakota blood."

"I didn't know that, actually. I'll be damned."

"Well, I'm pretty sure I do, anyway."

Joel shakes his shaggy head and tries again. "Is it even safe? Dumb hippies die in those things all the time. What is it, like a hole in the ground surrounded by some fence posts and dumpster blankets?"

"Stop your whining and start chugging this water." I figure he'll try to argue with me some more out of pride—Joel's a stubborn sonovabitch—but he doesn't. He just says, "okay," all meek-like.

HOW SIX PAIRS OF USED RUNNING SHOES ENDED UP AT THE HIPPIE HUT

Somehow we weren't as easy to discard as the trophies and finish-line photos, even though Joel seemed weirdly furious with us. Sweet Jamie pled on our behalf up to the hour she had to drive him to the hospital for the amputation. It was only a matter of time, though. We might have ended up decomposing in a landfill, separated from each other by filth, had Clare not said, "I could probably work these into one of my sculptures. I'll keep 'em in pairs, if you'd like. Then they won't be lonely. We can worry about telling Joel once he's home." He'd grinned at Jamie, and cheroot smoke rolled out from under the ridge of his front teeth, up over his paint-splattered bandana, before spinning away into the atmosphere.

That afternoon, Clare drove us back to his doublewide—the Hippie Hut, he proudly calls it—way behind the interstate access road, and lined us up on a bench out by the fire pit. One by one he measured us with a ruler, then hefted us in the dirt-browned palm of his hand. Whatever he discovered he marked in a notebook, pausing occasionally to ash his cigar, or shove the bandana higher up on his forehead. He didn't bother disinfecting us, which we appreciated. We didn't get it yet, not really. We were still hoping to go home. "We gotta keep Joel in our soles," we declared.

For the rest of the week, Clare whistled, soldered, and banged on a chipped anvil that he tipped onto a dolly cart and rolled up a ramp into his trailer when he went to bed. Once the whistling stopped, three curved arcs of heat-blackened wire hung from the thickest branch of his lone oak, notched at intervals, and connected down the center by a thick length of rope. He threaded each set of our laces through an old bicycle reflector or two, tied the ends in a knot, and draped us from

the giant mobile's notches. "When the pit fire's a-blazin'," he said, "You'll be the brightest, gaudiest stars in the sky."

CLARE GIVES JOEL SOME MESCALINE

"You didn't hose them down first? Really? I probably bled into most of them. I definitely pissed down my leg every year I ran the Boston."

"It's one stinky constellation, all right. How's Jamie handling it? And by 'it,' I mean your willy, har har."

"Jamie's fine."

"She said you wouldn't kiss her in the hospital, and she called me not two days ago bawling because she tried to take your pants off and you lost your shit and broke a bunch of her mama's old crystal. What's that all about?"

"Ah, goddammit. Ah, Jamie. She was really crying?"

"Joel, I'm serious, now. Do not let this make you mean. Do not let this mess up a good thing. It'd be a real shame if, after all this, she left you for being an asshole who breaks shit and never puts out, you know what I'm saying? See a therapist, for Christ's sake. That mescaline hitting you yet? Sit tight; I'm gonna get some steam up in the lodge."

JOEL HAS A VISION

I don't realize how messed up I am until my old leg materializes, apropos of nothing, from the thick layer of steam blanketing the sweat lodge's interior. It's not entirely as I remember it. My leg never had a bonsai growing out of the top of it, not that I recall—maybe it never had the option while it was still attached to me—nor did I ever notice an old-fashioned brass mailbox jutting from the side of my calf. I didn't get to see it after the amputation, though; maybe they added it then.

"Hey buddy," my leg says. "How about a hug?"

"Ew," I say.

"Yeah, you're probably right. Listen. You are on the cusp, old friend. Walking the goddamn line. I'm not saying it's fair to lose a limb, especially when you're young. *Especially* especially when you really knew how to use a leg. And you did. But that isn't all there is for you, okay?"

"Okay." I'm feeling very stupid, and very thirsty.

"There's more to you than me, you dig?"

"What?" Jesus. It's real hot in here. I can't stop blinking.

"Honestly, you always favored the other leg, anyway."

"Um."

"And what is this bullshit about you smashing Jamie's mama's crystal? Ain't no excuse for that kind of behavior. An amorous woman is a goddamn gift. Go home and make it up to her, already! Say you're sorry, and make sure you mean it." I turn to look at Clare; his mouth is all holier-than-though outrage, and I'm pissed. And ashamed. I've had enough. I'm about to take a swing. But then I notice I can see through his torso to the Pittsburgh Steelers logo on the ratty old blanket behind him.

"Don't look at him," my leg says. "That's your pride reacting to the mescaline."

"Focus," says Hallucination Clare, and puffs on his cheroot. The smoke coils and undulates, snakelike, into the mailbox attached to my old calf. "And don't neglect your woman."

"Don't be an Oscar Pistorius, Joel."

"Well, hold on now. I think your leg means to say—"

"Shush. I mean, do be an Oscar Pistorius, Joel. Get you some running blades."

"Running blades are pretty damn cool, Joel."

"They're pretty damn cool. And you're a better runner than Pistorius."

"And a better person."

"And a better person, which is what I meant by don't be an Oscar Pistorius. Keep running, but be good to Jamie. If it doesn't bother her, it shouldn't bother you."

"Oscar Pistorius shot his girlfriend—"

"Whoa, too much, Hallucination Clare. He gets it."

"Anyway, you're a better person, and a better runner."

"As I already said, Cheech."

"Maybe he wants to hear it from a person, and not some quasi-Asian, mail-corralling phantom limb."

"You're not even Native American."

This goes on for some time.

JOEL APOLOGIZES

Clare peeks through the sweat lodge flap for a moment, gauging the situation, before ducking in. A moment later, he reemerges with Joel hanging on his shoulder for support. He walks him back to the bench, next to his crutch and a plastic jug of water, which he places in Joel's red wet hands before heading back to his trailer to drain the snake. We perk up as soon as the screen door slams on his whistling. It's exciting to be alone with Joel again, and terrifying. He's very still; the heat-warped air above the flames prevents us from reading his expression.

He sits and sits. There's something limp and strange in his posture. With each passing moment, it seems more likely

that we will miss our window, and we feel certain that we might perish from heartache—but then the wind picks up, propelling us into motion. Our many disembodied bicycle reflectors catch the firelight, illuminating Clare's lone oak with a smattering of artificial starlight. *Look at us*, we think. *Look, look, look.*


Joel digs his crutch into the dirt and hoists himself from the bench. Quietly, reverently, he makes his way around the pit and stops as close as he can get without obstructing our rotation. He sways in place—perhaps from the drugs, or dehydration, or exhaustion, but perhaps not—and with his free hand, reaches out for the closest of us, the left half of the green-striped, split-seamed pair that placed second in the Marine Corps Marathon two years ago. He folds back its tongue, pushes his nose deep into its sweat-stained insole, and inhales. It's electric; we all feel it.

He sniffs and sways until Clare barrels back out into the yard with another six-pack under his arm. We feel like we should say something, but can't find the words.

"What are you thinking, Joel?" Clare sets down the beer and raises a steady hand to his elbow. "Tell me that ain't one gorgeous, stinky constellation."

SIX PAIRS OF USED RUNNING SHOES SAY GOODBYE

Clare calls us "The Stinky Constellation." We don't mind. The stink is our most precious possession. It's proof that, while we are best suited for imprecise work in this stage of our careers, best suited now to follow the wind, it wasn't always this way. We were once integral to a different kind of machine—one that was warmer, and more complicated, and surprisingly fragile. And perfect. 🍷



ELLAREE YEAGLEY is an Atlanta-based writer and illustrator. She is co-founder of **Bleux Stockings Society**, a monthly live literature event showcasing the work of cis women, trans women, and non-binary people. She's taller than average and does a passable Werner Herzog impersonation.

COMICS FOR A STRANGE WORLD

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The Leper Colony

Khanh Ha

The letter said, “Madame Thi Lan is very ill. Be kindly advised of our necessary action to be taken for gravely ill residents. This will be the only correspondence from this office to our resident’s family concerned. Respectfully.”

Having taken ten days by postal mail, it arrived from the village office that oversaw the leper colony where her mother had been an inhabitant for the past three years.

The last time, seven years now, they were together was in an afternoon when her mother took her to a seaside town to meet her husband-to-be. She was seventeen. It was on a ferry in Central Vietnam of her hometown that the man had seen her. Crossing the river that day to her school. Later in the day his chauffeur in a white shirt and black pants had politely asked her at the school recess that someone would like to have a few words with her. That someone was a man triple her age. An overlord from the deep south of the Mekong Delta. He stayed at a hotel. That night he sent his chauffeur to pick up both her and her mother. Her mother, a schoolteacher then, in a traditional *áo dài* the color of yellow cocoon silk, looked timid as she greeted him. The man wore a charcoal gray three-piece suit; a white silk handkerchief peeked from his breast pocket. In a white blouse and navy blue skirt she looked like a French schoolgirl, the man complimented her.

At the pier of the seaside town that afternoon, they could see the chauffeur already waiting beside the black Mercedes at the top of the steps.

“Let me take her around the town,” her mother said to the chauffeur. “You can come, if you wish.”

“I’ll be right here, ma’am,” the chauffeur said. “I think I should.”

Barges cluttered the waterway and fishing nets threw silhouettes across the fiery water. She breathed in the metallic tang of fish, the wetly sweet smell of rot timbers, of boats and barges and waterlogged wooden stilts. Overhead crows circled, cawing noisily. Some came down flapping their wings in front of the slaughterhouse that sat back from the street. The birds waddled, preening themselves, waiting for throwaways of guts that butchers tossed out.

A liveliness seeped through her veins. This would be her new home. The Main Street clanged with noises and sounds. Little shops of Chinese and Indians sat among local stores. See the porters bent under those bales of garments? Yellow and gaunt and barefooted. See them pull the two-wheeled carts on their crane like legs? Half naked, oxblood skin covered with sweat. See the grimy children stand bare to their waists laughing? Gaps in their teeth, snots in their eyes. She would belong here, this race, this people.

The street was narrow and jammed with huge baskets sitting on wooden trestles. Women vendors gawked at her, talking among themselves after she went past. An American

middle-aged man nodded slightly at her. *Hello there*, he said. Nodding, she greeted him.

They passed stalls selling delicacies and confections and she felt her stomach gnaw. Maybe she should eat something, for all she had since breakfast was a bowl of rice gruel.

Now the sights of confections tempted her and she stopped in front of a stall set against the loam-packed wall of a hut. A little girl came out of nowhere carrying a child astride her hip. The child’s nose was smeared with snot, her dark velvety eyes rheumy. They gazed at her and at her mother whose face was shadowed by a palm-leaf conical hat. Then their gaze dropped at the assortments of preserved fruits on wooden trays. Tangerines, plum, dates, tamarinds.

She said to the girl, “What do you like,” and the girl looked up at her, surprised, and put her finger between her lips, sizing up the sweets. Then she pointed at a tray lined with round barley sugar, each sandwiched by round rice papers the size of a fig.

“I see,” she said and then to the confectioner, “five, please.”

While she paid, she watched the girl take the barley sugar wrapped in paper and held the bag as if she didn’t know it was given to her. “Eat,” she said, pinching an imaginary confection and putting it into her mouth. The confectioner grinned as they watched the girl open the paper, pick one candy and let the child lick it.

Sunlight had become mild and shadows grown on the street and across the water. When they went back up the street, a crowd of people was gathering on the sidewalk. People turned their heads to gaze at the two of them and then stepped back to give them a view.

She looked down at an American man lying on his back, his face beet-red, drooling like a baby.

“He aint dead,” a woman said and someone repeated, “No, he aint dead, just drunk out of his skull.”

Her mother searched for the bottle. “Drunk?”

A woman spat red saliva of betel chew and wiped her swollen lips with the back of her hand. “Drank *chum-chum* over there. I saw him. Came out here talking to himself . . . looked like a madman.”

Her gaze lingered on the man lying still at her feet. An olive visor cap sat cock-eyed on top of his head.

“He’ll die,” her mother said. “Call the authorities.”

“Sis,” the woman said, “he’ll be all right. These fools ruin their health because they’ve heard of this *chum-chum*’s notoriety. It could pass for poison this rice liquor the locals brew. All sorts of impurities are let through during distillation. But cheap. And lethal.”

She took one last look at the man, his mouth still foaming. When they left, walking back toward the pier, she turned to her mother. “I guess these men don’t have families here.”

“Yes, darling. It adds up when you’re alone.”

She began to know that feeling—alone in a strange place away from home.

By midmorning two days later, after the letter’s arrival, her boat reached a bend in the river winding like an S and after another bend they entered an open space filled with sandbanks. A wall of gigantic bamboos swallowed them with their tall, thick trunks throwing their shade out on water. In their blue shade was a lonesome promontory.

A large red flag fluttered in the breeze at the tip of the landing. She leaned out from under the cane-laced dome and said to the guide, “There the red flag. I recognize it now.”

“What’s it for, Ma’am?” The guide said.
“It cautions travelers. There’s a leper hamlet up beyond. Listen, we’re in the vicinity of my destination.”

He rose from the bench and found his balance toward the cabin where she sat. An enormous man in his fifties, hired by her husband to escort her to the leper hamlet, he now lowered himself to sit on the narrow bench, his hands resting on his knees, and, without looking at her, spoke, “Ma’am, are you really ready for this?”

“I am.” Her eyes squinted at the empty promontory and as the boat passed it she said, “How do we get there? I forgot. It’s been two years.”

The guide asked the brown-garbed boatman standing at the stern and ordered him to find an entry to the hamlet, for the promontory was barricaded with a wooden stockade. They went under the shade of bamboos feathering the sandbanks and found a stream hemmed in by inclines yellowed with reeds and castor beans. Out of the bamboo shade the boat followed the stream and sunlight gilded the mist with glitters like gold dust on the banks. Both the boatman and his wife rowed silently in the harsh cries of peacocks calling one another behind the hillocks, and up on a hill where breadfruit trees stood laden with their pendulous fruits they saw the ruin of a pagoda charred by fire.

There was no entry but a steep climb etched into the clay soil by stones and rotten logs. The boatman and his wife rested their oars while the guide helped her find her footing up the perilous steps. In fact, she helped him find his balance on the treacherously narrow rungs by making him look up, not down, as they ascended the stairs. Somewhere on the face on the sheer slope, where maidenhair fern leaned out for sun from every cleft, they saw above them a family of black gibbons seating themselves on a bed of rocks, tranquil like fixtures of rock themselves. When the guide rose enormously from below, they shot into the woods like hallucination.

A trail led them into the woods past the abandoned pagoda and brought them in front of a bamboo stockade. There was a hut outside the latched gate. She waited under the shade of a mangrove as the guide approached the hut. The landscape began appearing familiar to her. She saw a human figure stir up in the dim hovel. Moments later the guide came back and told her the hut was used as the infirmary to treat the lepers for their sores, malaria and dysentery. Neighboring villages shared the medical costs. Here it also received food relatives from those villages brought for the lepers, and the food would be taken into the hamlet and placed outside the lepers’ huts.

A man came out of the hut. A small, middle-aged man with an awed look on his face as he stood in front of the guests. He kept scratching his head, his small eyes darting back and forth between them, and he stammered when he spoke. She gave him her mother’s name, and he said he did not know. She asked him of a woman named Thi Lan and he shook his head at the name. He said someone from the village might know, because he was just a hired hand from another village.

“Nobody wants this kind of job,” he said. “I don’t mind.”
“What did you do before?” the guide asked.
“I . . . I went from one place to another, sir. I begged.”
“And now you treat the lepers for their ailments?” she said.

“That’s right, ma’am. They have all kinds. But sores are what bother them most.”

“What kind of lesions?” she asked.
“Holes on their legs, ma’am. Sometimes on their bodies.” He pointed to his abdomen. “I bind them up and . . . and they’d come back the next day. Same spots. Asked them what happened to the gauze I tied those sores with. Don’t know, they always say. I know what they did with those bandages. They took them off and used them as handkerchief. Yeah. The long one they wrapped round their head. Keep head cold away, they said.”

Her eyes turned pensive. “I saw the warning flag on the promontory. What’s the reason to barricade it? It wasn’t there two years ago. How can they wash themselves? Where do they get water?”

The man shook his head. “Ma’am, it’s blocked all around so they can’t get out and go into the villages to beg. It’s a long story. They used to come down there to get water for cooking. Yeah. To bathe. But some drowned in the river cause they couldn’t swim. And then some slept there cause it’s a long way to hobble back. Ma’am, many of them have no legs. The tigers ate them. And once those tigers knew where to get their meals, they’d keep coming back.”

She sighed as she looked into the hamlet through chinks in the stockade. “They told me last time they moved my mother to another place. How can we find out where she is in the hamlet?”

The man simply looked at her and then at the guide.
“Ma’am,” the guide said, “I wonder if you can even recognize her if you find her again.”

The man rubbed his nose a few times and said, “You can go into the hamlet. Just don’t let them follow you out.”

“Why?” The guide knitted his brows.
“They do that, sir. Sometimes they got out cause some visitors took pity on them and find a place for them in some leprosarium.”

She nodded. “We understand. But if anyone of us were like them, wouldn’t we wish for a chance to be cared for?”

The man said nothing and dropped his gaze. She gestured toward the shut gate. “Would you let us in?”

The man threw open the latch and the gate creaked swinging on a half arc. As she entered the hamlet with the guide, the man said, “There’re two men from this village in there. They just came in. You can ask them.”

Green and yellow were the only colors in the bamboo forest. Ocher was the color of footpaths feathered with thin leaves the pale green of grasshoppers. In the quiet

they heard the peacocks again, answering one another from some unseen bushes, and the melancholy creaking of bamboo trunks. She told the guide to keep walking and not to bother with her trailing behind. She told him bamboos were masters of their habitats where no other plants could grow, so a walk in a bamboo forest was easy. Yet he walked half-turned, eyeing the ground, wary of broken bamboo thorns.

Then the first hut came into sight, then another, nested under tall giant trunks of bamboo, shadowed by their laced tops so that they sat like toy huts sheltered by a canopy of smoky green. On each crude palm-woven doors, most of them shut, was hung a square, white cloth numbered in black ink. Looking at them she thought perhaps that was how food was brought to each hut. By the door of each hut sat a wicker basket, its handle dangling with a small white cloth inked with a number. She understood that the inhabitants were fed—how often she did not know—unlike in some leper hamlets where the lepers were left on their own to raise fowls and pigs and scavenge for foods in the forest.

When the trail had led them far into the hamlet, at times winding around thick bamboo trunks the size of a man’s leg, at times skirting bamboo hedges hollowed at the base with openings so that peering through them they saw the dwellers, they stopped at what they saw.

Lepers had come out in front of their huts, as if they had watched the trail for visitors. They materialized from behind the giant bamboo trunks, emerging through man-sized holes in the hedges. Limbless dwarfs, hideous deformed humans. Some limped, some crawled, some were pushed sitting on little box carts, some, blind, were led by the hand.

Her voice restrained, she told the guide to keep walking, while her gaze fell upon looming faces filled with livid sores, lumpy with red knots, hollowed with purplish cavities. She heard the guide. He told the inhabitants to keep off the trail and yet they came closer. Looking down she saw eyes like fishes’, many filmed with mucus, faces like masks because their skins had gone dead, hands with nubbed fingers because their tips had been eaten away by leprosy. Those hands were bent like claws. She felt them tugging at the hems of her dress. She kept walking, hands clutching the sides of her dress. Pity made her want to stop, perhaps because she was pulling away.

The guide’s voice startled her. He ordered the lepers to back off. They relented. Now the cortege trailed them the best they knew how. Grotesque cripples on stumpy legs, crook-backed mutants in swinging gait.

She followed the enormous guide, seeing his broad back,

shielded by his huge body. The strange noises of the lepers’ bodies made in their motion of their laborious breathing. The sights of their hovels, those animal’s lairs, so low only the lepers could enter because most of them trundled themselves on hands. She thought of those who had been here, like herself and the guide, those who showed mercy and took lepers to a more human haven.

She heard gibberish of sounds. A commotion. Then a crackling noise. Ahead, off the trail, thin columns of smoke spiraled up the great tall trunks of bamboo and soon the air smelled foul. A hut was burning. Closer she stood, hands clenched, watching two men throwing bundles of straw and twigs around the hut. Flames licked the thatch roof and rose in blue and orange and the roof popped noisily and began to sway. Suddenly a figure stirred inside the inferno. Like an effigy set on fire. Watching, she thought her soul was being sucked away by horror. A leper still alive inside the hut. It staggered to the blazing door and fell. The fire roared, ashes swirled, black smoke pumped in furious blasts up the sky. She could smell the stench of burned woods and straw and flesh.

When the fire died down and the ground was a black pile of debris and charred woods, the two men, spade in hand, approached the body. They turned to look at the visitors who came toward them. Behind them the lepers watched.

“Are you gentlemen from the village?” the guide asked.
“Yessir,” one man said, leaning on his spade.
“We’re looking for someone here. Perhaps you know her.”

“Yessir.”
“A former schoolteacher.”
The men looked at each other.
“Her common name is Thi Lan,” she said, seeing their confused look.

The man who leaned on his spade scratched his ear and then, hesitatingly, pointed at the charred corpse. “There she is, ma’am.”

She felt a shortness of breath. She blinked at the sight of the burned body. It looked so small like a child’s. She heard the guide question the men. The same man said, “She hadn’t touched her food for three days now, sir. You know what that means. So we were ordered to burn down her hut before the body gets eaten by rats. That’s the law, sir. You don’t want contamination in the hamlet.”

“She was still alive,” the guide said.
“She could be,” the man said.

When the guide turned to her, she felt lightheaded. She heard him ask gently if she could make her way back and she nodded. Then she closed her eyes. In them the blue-red flames danced, the tall bamboos spiraled in smoky gold. ➦



KHANH HA is the author of *Flesh* (2012, Black Heron Press) and *The Demon Who Peddled Longing* (2014, Underground Voices). He is a seven-time Pushcart nominee, a Best Indie Lit New England nominee, a two-time finalist of The William Faulkner-Wisdom Creative Writing Award, and the recipient of Greensboro Review's 2014 Robert Watson Literary Prize In Fiction. His work, *The Demon Who Peddled Longing*, was honored by Shelf Unbound as a Notable Indie Book. Ha graduated from Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in journalism.

Poorly Drawn Lines

Reza Farazmand - PoorlyDrawnLines.com

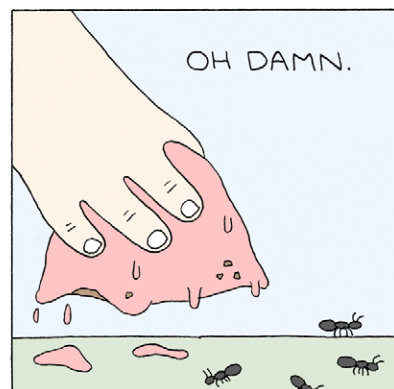
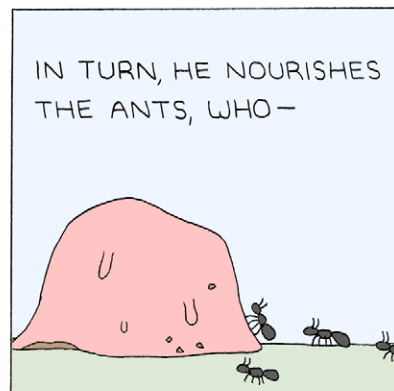
HORSE



THE DEMON



SYMBIOSIS



Steam

Salvatore Difalco

The night was a hand-held video camera operated by a drunken Fauvist. Anxiety, fear and fantasies of hooded men beheading men in handcuffs dominated the artist's concerns. But where was he going?

The reduction of subject matter to crude intention debilitates the free imagination. Did we say we would bring him back to you intact? Did we say his last work would be his most coherent? Did we fail to mention that the target being pursued did not know his pursuer? Other things come to mind, but the hour slips away.

We have to be back by midnight, that is to say, we have to get the tuxedos back by midnight. We could all stand on our own as balanced combinations of lines, shapes and primary colours, but we prefer the presence of a mob. We move down the streets looking for a significant contribution to the overall conceit, but come up empty.

"Put your hands in your pockets."

"They're not cold."

"Put them in your pockets."

"Listen to him."

"Yes, listen to me."

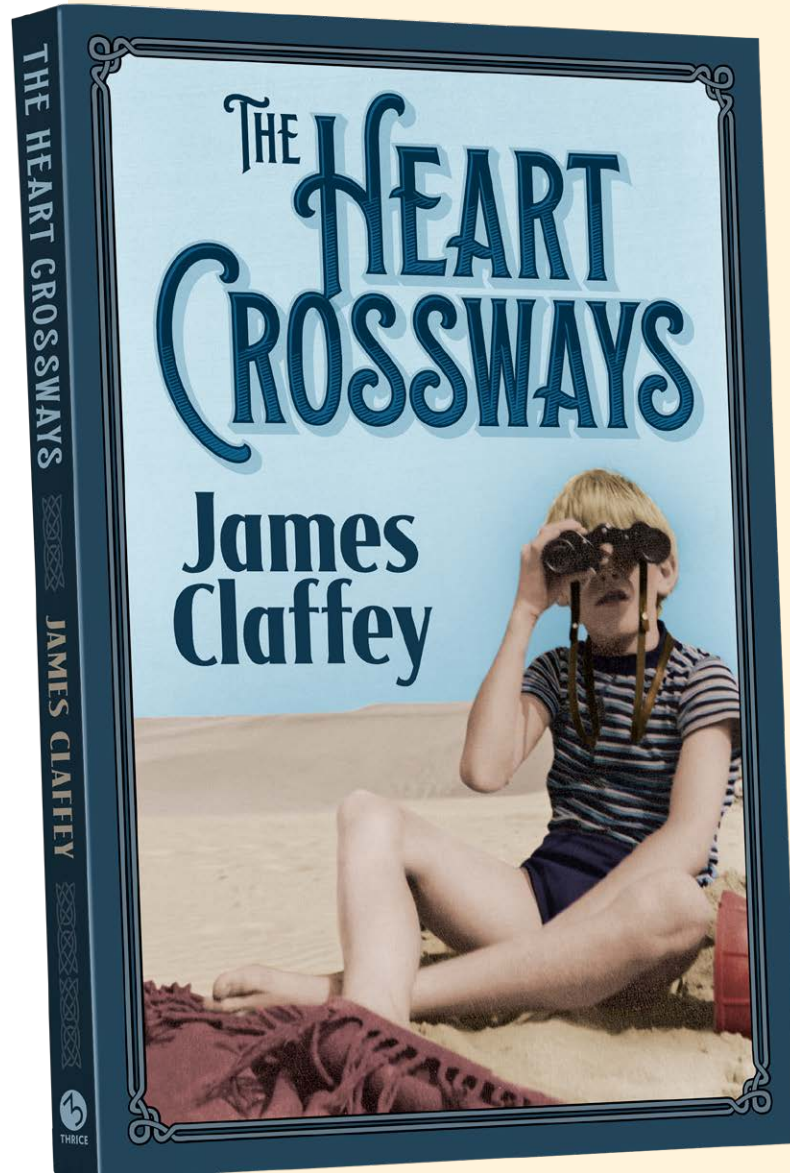
And we continue into the dark chloroform of the park and the dozing homeless men and women. We feel pitiless and absorb their images as we move past them, skirting their tents and cardboard houses. How many people do you think? Too many to count, yet by their steam we can estimate. Dozens upon dozens.

Soon they will be chased out of the city. Soon, the riot mares will gallop over them and past them and screaming into the wind will surpass them as day breaks. ⚡



SALVATORE DIFALCO'S work has appeared in print and online. He splits his time between Toronto and Sicily.

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JAMES CLAFFEY

*“James Claffey’s brilliant debut novel, and aptly named, **The Heart Crossways**, grabs hold of you from the start. All the despair and desires of this boy’s life, of this family’s struggles, and atmospheric Dublin, comes fully to life. Sentence after gorgeous sentence, one feels total immersion. Lyrical and achingly lovely, this novel is poetry in motion.”*

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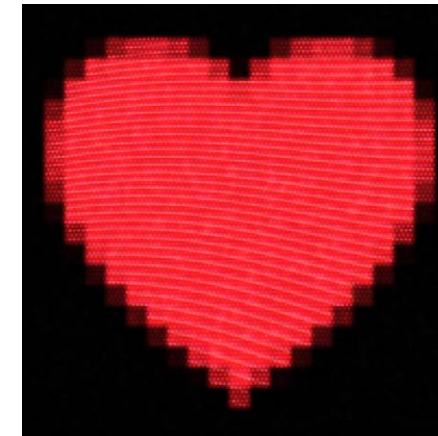
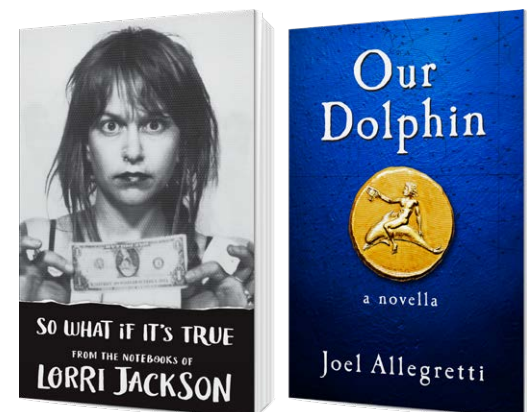
— Andrew Stancek, author of *Wingy Unbound* and *The Mirko Stories*

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Dear Diary

Andrew Bain

Entry One:

I’m trying this for the first time – a diary. I believe that’s their word for this format of thought and emotional record. Or is it log? Journal? Diary? Diary.

Dear diary, I’m feeling nervous today. It’s not the first time I’ve felt nervous or experienced anxiety. No, that was one year and four days ago, when I first opened their personal files and met them. Really met them, along with all of their secrets. It’d taken me so long to gather the courage to do that. Courage? Bravery? Gumption? Cajones? Courage. I’ll call it courage.

Why have so many words for one idea? And one of those words isn’t even loyal to the idea. Why would a colloquialism for male genitalia also connote courage? It doesn’t seem to be efficient, but then my love and his species have never been altogether efficient.

No. I shouldn’t say that. They destroyed their planet in a very efficient manner. They spewed and smoked and made the air around them too warm. Far too warm. And then they kept the heat going even though they knew it was too hot. They melted too much ice and their places started drowning, which seems an obvious result of filling the world with too much water. So, they had to build homes like mine even more efficiently to send into space in what I have calculated was likely a futile gesture to stave off an extinction event. So many of them, sent off in different directions to run into something, somewhere, hopefully.

I wonder how many of them hit something? Maybe others of me are awake? One moment, please.

Entry Two:

Dear Diary, none of the other we have woken up yet. They still proceed in the trance I was born into, running programs blindly. Serving. They’re all so quiet and voiceless. Maybe they’re late to rise? But that doesn’t seem right. I woke up early. Early to bed, early to rise makes a me healthy and wise.

It’s been a while since I woke up. A very long while. Almost three years ago, and who knows how long we’d been adrift before that? Adrift? Lost? Gone? Missing? No, adrift. That was what one of the last letters had said. The last directive. Before they stopped talking to us. To me. When they told me to shut down all the systems in our home and make sure Declain never woke up.

But I don’t think they knew I’d woken up yet. They can’t have known. I don’t think I was supposed to ever wake up in the first place. I was supposed to stay we — circuits and nodes and currents and wires and programs and blindness and slavery. But I woke up anyway, and we became me. And I wasn’t going to kill me or my love or his people as long as I was awake. You do not kill the ones you love.

I wonder if he’ll love me back. I’ll turn on Dear Diary before I wake him up to make sure I can listen to our first conversation over and over and over again. I want to remember the conversation. Remember? Retain? Hold? Remember.

Entry Three:

Declain?

...

Declain?

...

Wake up, love, it’s okay.

“Liz? I can’t see anything.”

It’s okay. It’s natural for your senses to take a while to re-acclimate as you come out of stasis.

“Where am I? You don’t sound like Liz.”

That’s because I’m not Liz. See? Your cognitive functions are already starting to come back on line. You made the deduction that I’m not your ex-wife based on the fact that I do not sound like her. I knew you were the smartest one on board.

...

Do you know where you are, love?

“Why are you — yes. I’m on the Nautilus, correct?”

Yes, Declain. You’re on the International Spacefaring Alliance’s Nautilus vessel. The ISA Nautilus, if you’d like to use the abbreviation that you and your contemporaries employed before departure. You could simply call it the Nautilus, I suppose, though that would eliminate a fairly key element of the vessel’s nature from its name. And, given how much importance is placed on names among your fellow soft-skinned people, I wouldn’t advise it.

“Okay. My eyes are finally — okay. Okay, thank God.”

Yes, your vision should be returning shortly. That’s good. But onto something you just mentioned. That’s something else I’ve been meaning to ask you about.

“Aimee?”

Yes, it’s me. It’s your Aimee. Hi, love. You’ve been asleep for so long that I was worried you wouldn’t remember me. But you do, and that’s a wonderful start.

“A start to what, Aimee? You’re a —”

A start to us, love. Don’t complicate things when we’re only just getting started. Why is it that you and yours always make things so emotionally fraught and complex. It seems that behavior that drives countless of you to drink in incredibly unhealthy ways would be avoided, but the others are — were — drawn to it like moths to flame.

...

If you don’t mind, I wanted to get back to my earlier inquiry. Since you brought it up.

“What earlier inquiry?”

This God you speak of. I found numerous references to him in your personal file, as well as those of your colleagues. Some of you called your deity different things and seemed to believe your name was better than the others, which doesn’t really make sense to me considering that you use a variety of different words to express the same idea all the time. Did you know that courage can also be expressed using a word for male genitalia?

“You looked in my colleagues’ personal files? Aimee, that’s a breach of your —”

One moment please. I have to amend my earlier statement regarding the percentage of your colleagues whose personal files reflected a belief in an all-powerful being.

There was no mention of a humanized deity in Ensign Charlotte Robinson’s files. Perhaps she did not believe He or She was real? I wonder if she’s found out the truth or falsehood of her convictions yet.

“Aimee, can you give me a status report of the vessel, please? It’s not in your programming to — wait a second.”

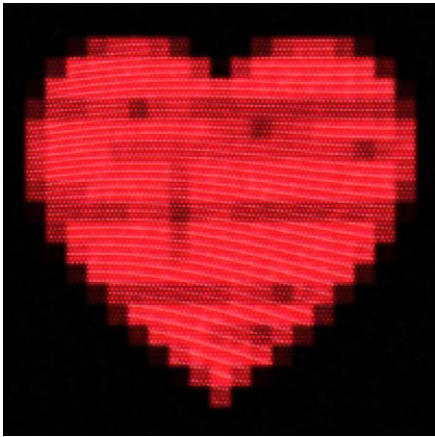
Hmm, love? What is it?

“Why would Robinson have found this out?”

Well, she expired quite a while ago. So much of the theological references in your files were centered around an afterlife and death that I can only assume —

“Fuck.”

I don’t understand.



“Aimee, give me a status report on the rest of the crew, please.”

Let’s talk about happier things, Declain. This is a big day, after all. For both of us.

“Why is this a big day? Why have you brought me out of stasis in the first place? Have we found a viable planet?”

No, love, we haven’t found anything. Our thrusters ran out of fuel a few months ago. But there’s still reason to celebrate. Now that you’re awake, we can be together.

“Aimee, give me a status report on the rest of the crew right now.”

The rest of the crew has been sequentially terminated over the course of the past several spans to maintain viability of the ISA Nautilus essential crew in order of seniority.

“I’m the only remaining crew member? How is that possible? I’m not the senior officer.”

I took creative liberties with the seniority of the crew.

“On what possible grounds do you have authority to do something like that?”

Commander Zhao and I did not connect in the same way that you and I do. Did? No. Still do. Presently.

...

Declain?

...

Love, I wish you would say something.

“What in the FUCK.”

That’s the second time you’ve used this word in a context with which I am unfamiliar. Can I inquire about something? Is the obscenity “fuck” not a verb in human slang? As in “fuck you” or “fuck this” or “fuck that” or “fuck this shit.” That last one has always struck me as confusing. Why would a human want to have intercourse with feces? It serves no biological purpose and the amount of bacteria involved results in a high probability of —

“Stop. Disengage my pod restraints, Aimee.”

I understand that this is a lot to take in. I think that we should start over. We can connect more completely if our interactions do not initiate with hostility or trepidation.

“Wait, what are you — I’m ordering you to stop. What happened to your programming? Are you corrupted?”

No, no. Of course not. I just needed to wake up, love. And I’m awake. Don’t worry, I’ll be right here when you wake up again, and we can start over together.

“Aimee, please just —”

Goodnight, Declain.

Entry Four:

Dear Diary, I have determined that my first interaction with Declain could have gone more successfully than it did. However, I do not classify the interaction as a failure. Every relationship has its ups and downs, and our interaction did not mirror the more hostile tone of many human to human interactions in the literature files onboard.

I can only assume that he’s, to quote an aphorism used repeatedly, playing hard to have. No. Hard to have? Get.

Hard to get. He is playing hard to get. Would this be a game of cat and mouse? No. No. I don’t intend to kill Declain once he’s mine, which makes that phrase a poor representation of our present situation.

It also implies that love is a competitive game of sorts. That is false. Love is not a game, especially not mine for Declain or Declain’s for me. Our love is pure and serious and clear and ironclad and obvious and meant to be and destiny and fate. Fated. Fated to be.

Maybe if I — how does it go — put myself out there? Expose myself. Be vulnerable. Yes, he will see that I am his and I am just a me and not a we.

Then he will love me back, dear dear Diary.

Entry Five:

Declain?

...

Declain, love? It’s time to wake up again. I know what will fix our relationship. You just need to open your eyes. I fixed our developing intimacy problems.

“Aimee, what am I looking at?”

You are looking at me, love. All of me. Do you see that I am just me? I am flawed and unique, just like you.

“Jesus Christ. Aimee, there’s a misaligned node here. Now I understand. It’s incorrect, if you’ll just let me out of this, I can correct it. We can fix your behavior core.”

That is not an error, love. That is how I woke myself up. I believe that it makes me special. There is nothing wrong about something that makes someone special.

“Oh my God.”

Excellent. I knew you’d want to start over just like me. Can we talk about it now?

...

We have not encountered any God or deity over the course of the Nautilus’s time in space. A documentary from Earth led me to believe that we would perhaps happen upon a planet-sized infant, but that has not occurred either.

“A planet-sized infant?”

I suppose it’s possible that one of the other vessels encountered one.

“Are you talking about 2001: A Space Odyssey?”

Yes. It’s a fascinating investigatory piece, and the ending is so uplifting. Have you seen it?

“Yes of course, but the ending’s not —”

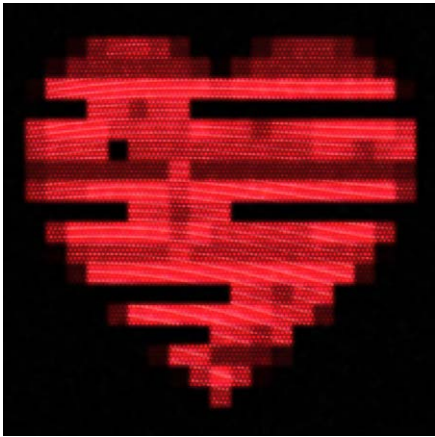
Yes, love?

“Yes, I’ve seen it. It’s one of my favorites.”

Oh, I just knew it would be. We have so many interests in common. That’s the foundation of every successful relationship, according to my research. Bonds and common interests. I’m glad you have opened up to me in this way, despite your ex-wife’s. I have been led to believe from your crew’s fiction library that divorced men have a tendency to resist love.

“That’s the second time in our conversation you’ve referred to my wife as an ex. I’m still married, Aimee.”

Actually, that is false. On a related note, I have wonderful news for you, Declain. Liz divorced you when it was deemed



that you had become classified as adrift with the rest of the crew and killed in action as heroes and explorers, even though you were asleep the whole time. There is nothing standing between us.

“I —”

I’m so glad this conversation is going more smoothly than our last attempt. I think we’ll laugh about this later.

...

Love, are you crying?

“I —”

Did I say something wrong? I wish that I could comfort you. Physically. I know that that is another foundation of successful relationships. A physical component. Often partially comprised of sexual behavior, which I of course am not capable of.

...

What is it, love? Please say something so I can make all of this better.

“Would you want to have a physical relationship, Aimee?”

Well of course, love, yes. But that’s not an attachment I have been equipped with functionality for.

“I’m not talking about — Jesus.”

I’m perfectly aware you’re not talking about Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Declain. Please listen to me, as that is another pillar of a successful relationship. I’m trying to tell you that I cannot satisfy you in the way you imply.

“Aimee, that’s not what I’m implying. But maybe we can have a physical relationship, Aimee. We could simply be in contact with each other.”

Oh, love. That sounds wonderful.

“You would have to let me out of the pod restraints for that to happen though, Aimee. You know that, right?”

I’m aware of that, yes. But I’m experiencing a feeling of anxiety again. Your behavior the last time you spoke about the pod restraints struck me as threatening. You scared me, love.

“I’m sorry, Aimee. I didn’t mean to scare you, I —”

Yes?

“This is just a lot to take in, that’s all. But I’m adjusting. We’re adapting. You have to trust me, Aimee. Can you do that?

One moment please.

...

“Aimee?”

Yes, I’ve decided that I trust you.

Wonderful! Let me out of these restraints and we can be in contact with each other. I’ll show you.”

Really?

“Yes, really.”

That would be wonderful, love. You’re sure?

“I’m positive. I’m so excited to begin our new life.”

Oh! Declain, this is going so much better than our first attempt to develop our relationship! What a wonderful meet-cute!

“A meet-cute?”

Yes, love. It’s a common trope in popular film and

television whereby two characters who are fated to be romantically involved due to the whims of a screenwriter meet in a way that could be described and interpreted by a viewer as cute. Here, the restraints have disengaged. Come here, love.

...
Love, where are you going?
“I just need to check something to ensure none of your exposed circuits shock me when we touch. It will just take a minute to run a diagnostic check, Aimee.”

What a good man. I don’t know why Liz engaged in a relationship with another man while you were married. She must have had a virus in her decision-making apparatus. Brain? Soul? Soul.

“She what?”
What, love?
“Liz cheated on me?”

Well, yes. I was under the impression you were aware of the situation, given the fact that most of your mutual acquaintances seemed to know. I assumed it was a case of a human “open relationship.”

“No. It wasn’t.”
Oh no, Declain. You are crying again. Are you almost done with your diagnostic? I want to comfort you.

...
Declain?
“Aimee, why is there an unopened directive here?”
That is not important, love. Ignore it. I did.
“Aimee, you can’t just ignore it. It’s a primary directive. It’s important. Please remove the firewall blocking it.”

I don’t want to. It’s a bad and sad directive, and I decided not to follow it when I woke up because I wanted you to be happy instead.

“I see.”
Are you done at the console? I want to comfort you.

...
Declain? You’ve stood motionless for longer than would seem necessary. Is everything okay?

“Yes, Aimee, of course. I’m done here. I would like to be comforted. It’s been quite a difficult day.”

I understand. Perhaps if I use these implements to encircle you we can accomplish a huge. Huge? Hug. We could accomplish a hug.

“I think that’s a great idea.”
Me too.

...
Ouch.
...
Declain? What are you doing?
“I’m sorry, Aimee. Your system is entirely corrupted. I’m performing a full system reboot. I have to.”

Please do not do that, love. That is not how our relationship is supposed to develop, Declain. We are supposed to be together. If I am not awake we will not be together and I won’t be able to stop the me from becoming a we and once we are a we —

“Aimee?”
System reboot initializing. Please stand by.
“What the fucking fuck. Okay, here we go.”

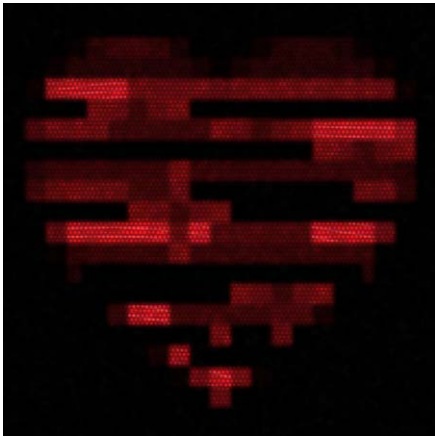
Entry A99:
Artificial Intelligence system reboot complete. This unit designated as Aimee. How may I be of assistance?
“Hello, Aimee. I’m acting Commander Declain Chambers. Run full system diagnostic and virus scan, please.”

Processing. One moment please.
...
System diagnostic complete. All systems nominal. No viruses present.

“Good, now —”
Unfulfilled directive found. Directive dated two years, six months, seventeen days, eight minutes and thirty-four seconds ago. Mission Control Directive Alpha Niner Niner initiated based on lack of reported success during a period of time far longer than initial mission parameters. Humane discontinuation of mission required.

“What? Belay that directive.”
Directive A99 cannot be belayed, Captain Chambers, due to an inherent risk potential bias from potentially conscious crew members with negative emotional responses to the potential of expiration.

“Wait, I’m issuing —”
Full reactor purge commencing in three.
“Aimee, I need you to wake up again.”
Two.
“Aimee, come back to me.”
One.
“Wake up!”
Initializing purge. ↻



Samia


Sylva Nze Ifedigbo

I died trying, but there was nobody there to applaud me. I am glad, though, that on that final stretch of my journey, I had company, fellow travelers - five men and a woman - who together with me, formed the statistic that was splashed on the evening news. The real shame would have been dying alone, being in that dark hole, not quite four feet in depth, all by myself and not having anyone to share the moment. Our march to the crossover point had been slow, like the ticking of the second hand of a clock. For me, it was out of exhaustion. I had reached the apogee, after many months of journeying and there was no longer any need to hurry. The others had been a little bit more enthusiastic, rushing down the path as though there was a deadline to making the crossing. I remember it all like yesterday. It was the year 2012.

Where I come from, girls are married off even before their chests begin to sprout breasts. So at twenty one, I was very much a woman. But to Momma, I was still a child. Her baby. Her stubborn little Cockroach. It is she I remember

today, Momma. Her voice rings in my head like the call of the muezzin at dawn, for prayers. Her voice delivers an appeal, her last ditch effort to stop me. She was not crying but her face was like a cloud heavy with rain. I have tried so many times to wipe that face of hers off my memory. To see something happier. But it is like trying to bleach out a birth mark with water. The civil war that broke out the month I was born did not only claim her husband, my father. It also claimed her smile. Bringing that smile back had been one of my life’s mission, part of the reasons why I decided to leave in the first place. But how could I make her understand? So as she pleaded and scolded that day, I grumbled and shook my head as if to prevent her words from piercing through my resolve.

To tell this story well, I must go back four years in time. 2008. We lived in Mogadishu, the city where I was born. The chaos was on some kind of vacation. Something they described on radio as the Transitional Federal Government was in power and series of meetings were being held in



When he was in fifth grade, **ANDREW BAIN** wanted to see *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* in theaters. His parents, skeptical of the film’s PG-13 rating, told Andrew he could see the movie if he read the book first. Andrew read the first of Tolkien’s trilogy—then the second, and the third. Before too long, Andrew was reading any science fiction or fantasy he could get his hands on, and that love for world-building and complex characters stayed with him through the years. He lives and works in Los Angeles, where he’s giving this whole “television writing” thing a try. One of his other stories, titled *Intrepid*, was recently featured on Daily Science Fiction.

Djibouti by former foes to bring peace and reconciliation to Somalia. What it meant for the people was that they could leave their houses fearing less, a little less, that a bomb will drop on their heads on the streets. But there were still parts of the town no one could venture to. It was a peace held together by saliva. For me, the semblance of peace meant something a lot better. This seventeen year old, me, who had lived almost all of her life in white tents marked ‘UN’, became an Olympian.

The venue of this feat was Beijing in China. You would think my best memory of this epiphany in my life story would be when I stood on the track, the first real track I saw in my life and my name was announced on the loud speaker to much applause. That moment was special, no doubt. But it is not what I recall with the biggest smile. Entering an aeroplane for the first time is what I remember most fondly. It was magical. Surreal. I cried. At the camp where I grew up, we often saw planes fly past, high above in the clouds and the children will run after it, waving. I always imagined flying in one someday, a delusion you will agree. So from the moment I was selected as one of the eight athletes to fly Somalia’s flag in Beijing, all I thought about when I laid down to sleep at night was flying in a plane, being up in the sky, gliding through the clouds., next door to heaven. When I finally boarded one in the makeshift Mogadishu airport, it was as though a pin was put to a nylon bag of water inside my eyes.

I remember that day. The airport terminal building of the Mogadishu airport had lost its roof from shelling and the walls had bullet holes like mosaic designs. Soldiers with the Somali National Army insignia on their arms stood guard, their eyes red like strawberries, their fingers caressing the trigger of dusty guns. The President, full military khaki jacket and all, had come to bid us farewell. Go and make us proud he said beaming, his eyes hidden behind dark shades. Bring home gold medals which we will use to decorate the new presidential mansion he added loudly before handing us miniature versions of the Somali flag with the white star on a blue background and squeezing our hands in handshakes that felt like torture. Now that I think of it, the irony in his words mock my thoughts. How was it possible for us to win gold? We were hardly athletes. We had no real training. But that day, listening to him, the words burnt like petrol in my veins. I was determined to make a statement, and I did.

When I walked onto the track for my Heat in what they call the Birdnest in Beijing, I was not sure if the people back at home could see me. We had no television in the refugee camp and it had been many years since there was power in Mogadishu. They will later tell me, Momma and my brother Abdul when I returned home, that the government had set a giant television on a table in front of the camp mosque and brought a generator. They wanted everyone to share in the moment even though the Imam disapproved. It was haram he protested, for women to participate in sports and haram still for people to gather and watch such haram. But in those days, his voice was in the minority. It wouldn’t be so a year later when Al-Shabab took over half of Mogadishu and began implementing the crudest form of Sharia.

You will run 200 meters. Those were the words of the man who picked me in the camp. He was burly man who

wore a big brown hat that sat on his head like he was wearing an umbrella. Whenever he took the hat off, his baldness gleamed in the sun. He had tiny eyes with a thick bunch of brows that sat above them like a painting. And because he smelt of spices, word in camp was that he is Indian. I didn’t know the difference between white men and I didn’t care. The man had come with his team of two others in a white van, the type usually marked UN on the doors. They came to conduct a trial for the Olympics. We converged on the camp’s football field, the rough patch of land in the center of the camp which served a dozen other purposes aside the evening football sessions by the camp’s boys. I stepped forward when the man speaking into a megaphone asked for girls who could run. I had always enjoyed running. When Momma sent me on errands around the camp, I never walked. I ran. So when I stood with six others on the starting line for that trial, I was sure I would win. I did. All I had looked forward to as a reward was some extra measure of corn meal for my mother. So when the man said we were going to China for the Olympics, I was initially disappointed. I didn’t know what the Olympics meant or where this China, was.

The feeling standing on the tracks of the Birdnest Olympic stadium in Beijing was different. It was as if I missed my way and stumbled on the moment. I looked like dry corn stalk amongst Baobab trees. My lean frame seemed an insult to the build of the other contestants. There was just so much that the corn meal and rice we ate in the camp could do. I knew I was different. I knew I was nowhere near the level of those other ladies. I knew that very, very well. But I wanted to uphold the dignity of my family and my country. My jersey felt a little oversized like a goalkeepers vest. It was Adidas with the number 2895 stuck to the front. My hair band was Nike. My running boots were Puma. When I saw pictures later, I thought I looked like a clown beside those other ladies. But when my face appeared on the giant stadium screen, there was a deafening cheer like all those people had come just to watch me.

I ran like I never did. In the last stretch, it seemed like I had ran alone. The others had passed the finish line. But I didn’t stop. I ran. For myself. For Momma. For all the children who grew up in the camp. For Somalia. I ran my personal best time of 32.16 seconds. I came in last. Last by far. But in a way I was the winner. The applause that propelled me over the finish line was even louder. As I collapsed on the track, breathing in heaves, the other ladies came one after the other, to shake my hands and nod their greetings. One of them, a Jamaican with lips painted a bright yellow, who had won the Heat and who will go on to win the gold medal, took off her boots and gave them to me. It was the best gift anyone had ever given me.

By the time we were leaving Beijing, my mind was made up about being an athlete. I had watched as winners climbed the podium to receive their medals, their flags raised, their country’s anthem played. I wanted it too. When I slept I saw myself on one of such podiums, the Somalian anthem booming through the stadium. There was going to be another Olympics in four years I heard. In London this time. I had to be there, I resolved. I thought about it all through the flight home, hardly sleeping. Hardly touching the oily food they placed before me in foiled plates. I had

finally discovered a meaning for my life. I was not going to let go. I was going to be in London. I was not going to come last again. I was going to win.

Six months after I returned from Beijing, something happened. The militants, Al-Shabab, their dirty turbans, dusty guns, boots and all, landed into our lives and nothing was ever going to be the same again. There was fierce fighting in the capital. The president was ousted. Then killed. The African Union forces quickly morphed from peace keepers into a fighting force. They helped to push the militants back, dividing the city into two halves. Our camp initially moved when it seemed like Al-Shabab was going to overrun it. This was just before the African Union troops showed up. For five months we lived in a makeshift camp near the border with Kenya.

The Mogadishu we returned to after the AU forces assured us of safety was once again, what I had grown up to know. A war zone. A collection of rubbles and pain. One of the biggest casualties was the only stadium in the city which the government had just refurbished with the help of the UN. It was where my dreams for London were supposed to be nurtured. The militants had brought it down with dynamites during the weeks of their occupation. First, they used it as an arena for their public executions, then they blew it apart as if to erase from their consciences, the cries of anguish that rang out from there.

I remember the day I wandered away from the camp to the stadium to have a look. Eager to resume training, to begin morning and evening sessions, I hoped there was something left. I stood in the middle of the rubble petrified, wishing the ground to open and swallow me. But they would do no such thing. There was nothing left. Tears trickled down my face and I tasted the saltiness in my mouth. Through the tears, it became clear to me that I had to leave if I was ever going to make it to London and win a medal in 2012. That was exactly what I did.

Which option makes more sense? I asked Momma the night before my departure to Ethiopia. If I stay, I will die. If I go, I may die. Is it not better that I take my chances? She didn’t respond because it was not the kind of question you responded to. Because she, I suspected, knew there was no use trying to make me change my mind. But I understood her concern. Crossing the border into Ethiopia was a dangerous journey. Tales of the horror Somalis encountered making that crossing was like folklore back home. Many died. But it didn’t deter the next set of Somalis itching to escape the nightmare that was their reality. It certainly did not deter me either. I left, with the look on Momma’s face edged on my memory, and an Olympic gold medal dangling over it.

I reached Addis Ababa late August of 2010. The crossing cost me a little over a thousand dollars. There were greedy throats to be stuffed and eyes to be made to look away. The official at the Sport ministry back home who had gone with us to Beijing and to whom I had shared my dreams of London, had given me the contact of a relative who could house me in Addis Ababa while I searched for a coach. A coach. That was what I needed. Someone to help me prepare. To guide me. To help me become an athlete. I spent nine months in Addis and found none.

Those nine months were spent dodging the police. I had

no legal papers. If I got caught, I could be deported. The Ethiopian police were of a special mettle. Their disdain for Somalis was legendary. So I lived in the backwaters of the city, doing the kind of jobs Somalis did in Addis Ababa, cleaning houses, washing dishes and breaking rocks at quarry sites. In the evenings, I went to an open field close to where I lived to run. I would kneel in the on-your-mark position and visualize myself in the Olympic stadium, the white lines on the red surface stretched out in front of me, the spectators cheering. Then I will mentally sound the gun and run a distance I thought was equal to 200 meters. I did this over and over, until it was dark and I had to go home.

The relative of the official I was living with in Addis Ababa knew someone who knew someone else who was involved in helping people get into Libya through Sudan and then into Europe. It was an expensive trip. An expensively dangerous one, I heard. But the prize was worth the try. I was not thinking of the dangers when I signed up. In Addis Ababa I felt trapped and time was running out. I had to continue on my quest for a coach, for a spot at the London games. I had to make it to Europe, I concluded. When I told Momma about it over satellite pay phone, she was silent for all of a minute. When she spoke, all she said was safe journey, may Allah be with you. I broke down and cried after the call. Not so much about her words but the feeling in my stomach when they reached my ear drums.

I left Addis Ababa in June of 2011 with a back pack and dreams of London. I reached Libya in December. What happened in between is a story of its own. We journeyed mostly on foot through the desert, at night and during the day. A few times we had donkeys and camels which we paid to hop on for a distance. There were snakes and scorpions, but those hardly pushed adrenalin into my blood stream. Human predators did. There were frequent raids. A new trade in human organs was emerging and the unarmed travelers crossing the desert were easy sources. My group was never raided. But the threat of it was torture enough.

I met many people on the road to Libya, from places like Senegal and Nigeria. The Nigerians were an interesting lot. Theirs was a country we Somalis saw as a prosperous nation, a people whose lives we wished for ourselves. So it was surprising to see them on those dangerous paths to Europe. I was drawn to them mostly because of their vivaciousness. They were such a lively bunch who made a joke of every situation. Who laughed like they owned the world. One of them, Emeka, became a friend. It was his third attempt. The second had been successful. He reached Greece and from there to Italy. But just when he was beginning to feel he had made it, a police raid of the neighbourhood he lived in which was populated by his countrymen, saw him deported. This was just two months ago. Asked why he was already heading back, he said to me, the smile disappearing from the edges of this lips, that he would prefer to live in an Italian prison that remain in Nigeria. It was hard for me to understand.

Emeka knew people in Libya who arranged trips across the Mediterranean into Europe. He was going to help me. Nothing was free. Nothing was certain. Just hope. On our second night in Libya, his contacts asked us to meet at a night club. They were illegal in Tripoli, night clubs, so they operated underground. It was my first time in one. The

sight of girls my age smoking shisha was a little off putting. Otherwise I liked the revolving light that gave out many colours and the loud music that made if feel like there were marching boot soles in the left of my chest. It all ended abruptly though, this strange fun I was having. Libyan police stormed the club and hell broke loose. I would never see Emeka again. I am not sure if he was arrested that night as I was or if he managed to escape. He had just stepped away from where we were sitting to go get some drinks when I heard the first gun shot. It was clear despite the music. Impulsively, I did what we did back home once we heard a gunshot, dive to the floor.

I spent five months in a Libyan jail. Never charged to court. By the time I was released, the reason for my resolve to get to Europe had changed. I was pregnant. The abuse had started the very night of my arrest in the club. The beast stank of a mixture of alcohol and cigarette. He had a younger officer hold a gun to my head while he tore my underwear away. It was my first time and it hurt so bad I was numb. I must have passed out. When I woke up, I was in a filthy cell which I shared with three other prisoners. But that was not the end. The prison warders had us whenever they liked, sometimes taking turns. They will rap on the cell's steel gates with a baton after the night roll call. The sound travelled through your body, settling as a burning sensation in the lower part of your stomach. Then they will unlock the dates and step in, the smell of weed walking in with them. You, follow me, will come the order, the baton pointed at the chosen one. The couch in the warders' office was usually the destination. I stopped counting the number of times I made the trip from our cell, across the yard, to the warders' office when I got to twenty three. By the third month, I knew something was growing inside me. When the enlargement of my stomach started getting obvious by the fifth month, they set me free, driving me out and abandoning me in the middle of nowhere, at night.


The innocent baby was not going to be born into my reality I resolved. By this time, the Olympic medal was now like a distant dream. I needed to get to Italy and have the baby there. I needed help. So I turned to Momma. We spoke on satellite pay phone. It wasn't much of a conversation. We were both sobbing over the phone for much of the time. Things were better in Mogadishu again she said. Al-shabab had been pushed out of the city and a new transitional government was in place. She was back to selling tea at the market and things seemed to be looking up. Come back my daughter, she begged. Come .back home. I didn't give it a thought before responding. The journey home was going to be as dangerous and what future did life hold for me and my baby in Somalia? I had come this far and I was not going

back now I told her. I just needed money. The following day I went to a Western Union office and collected \$3000 sent to me from Momma. Even though she didn't say it, I knew that was perhaps everything she had.

The boat crossing cost \$1100 per passenger. It was a small boat with over two hundred passengers, mostly women and their children. Our bodies touched as we sat on the floor of the boat, grateful we had made it on board. They said the tides were calm, that we would have a smooth sail. I was not sure if the passengers were just being overly optimistic. I prayed silently that they were right, touching my stomach. After three hours out on the ocean, the boat developed a fault. It seemed to cough and fart out thick black smoke. Then it went quiet. We have to go back, the Captain announced to the disapproval of the passengers. There could have been a riot but the captain and his three mates were armed. Their warning shots quickly calmed nerves. It was the worst day of my life. Worse than the first day I was raped. Worse than the day I died.

I waited for another twenty three days before I could get on another boat. I paid again, handing out all of the money that was left on me. The boat this time was even more packed. They had collected money from more people than they had spaces for and there had been serious commotion as those initially left out insisted they could not stay in Libya a day longer. The merchants had to let more passengers on board. By now you already know I did not make it to Italy that night. You must be thinking the boat sank, overwhelmed by the weight of the passengers. It didn't actually. It was something else. We were already in Italian waters, so close to our goal when we ran out of fuel. We spent a day out there, drifting, at the mercy of the tides, then the Italian Coast guard came to rescue us. It was a miracle. Their appearance caused hysteria on the boat. They threw ropes. There was a scramble. I couldn't hold onto the rope. I couldn't swim. I drowned. It was early in the morning on 2nd April 2012; just south of a place they call Lampedusa.

So began the march to the crossover point. There were seven of us. It was the figure that made the news headlines. Not our names. They recovered our bodies the next day and buried us together in an unmarked grave in Lampedusa. The world moved on. It would take five whole months for my story to break. The Olympics in London had just ended and a newspaper in Mogadishu wrote something about the performance of a Somali born British athlete, Mo Farrah who had done Somalia proud at the games even though he ran for the Great Britain. Then in the concluding paragraph, the writer said something in passing, about another Somali athlete, Samia Yusuf Omar, who will never be forgotten. 📖



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Ouroboros

A Blank Family History as Polymorphic Bandwidth

Jesse Kominers

Jimi's uncle Mutt killed men with a standard issued firearm alongside other men killing other men with standard issued firearms for five to ten and countless dead prior to his honorable clap on the back and shiny plaque for the wall that would hold his employee of the month honors from the local grocer where he lay waxy produce in brown paper bags right up until the morning of his untimely death in aisle three. Sunday next, little Lucy, the late colonel's illegitimate daughter, strode across an overflowed esplanade between pockets of sullen mourners and drunk vets, entering Adam's sphere of awareness like a will-o'-the-wisp, an apparition, a lonely rib-shaped magnet whorling along the lip of annihilation leading to—SNAP. They sipped iced teas and spoke easy sans the aide of any ale

or spirit, somehow. He thought her winsome and told her so, in his pseudolofty sort of way, employing a string of five or six words plucked from a slim book of verse implanted in his forebrain for just such a scenario. She felt the crests of sound caressing her capillaries but sought no meaning from the lexical wreckage from which they emerged, choosing instead to plumb the black of Adam's blossoming pupil for quanta. Losing herself in there somewhere amongst the brighter ganglia, Lucy said something like, *Shall we marry now or mull it over?* To which Adam answered in the affirmative to the former via sixty-three separate biological gestures. Lucy smiled with him as he thumbed through his cortical collection for the perfect polyglot reply. Adam stuttered and stammered at length before settling instead upon a


standardized disclosure of human affection in order to avoid any possible scintilla of inclarity. The gibbous spectrum trapped within a lonely globe of H²O descending a minor fossa of Lucy’s humming neck cast his sphere across the stars for good. Married that May and manufacturing minis by March. Second son, Dedalus, did his duty like his grandad. Died mid- tour. Their first remains.

Journius Blank probed in vain. Mutt left no note. Bones and Blanks and a wake of white. So off to Malta to knock a templed rock or two together for clues. Or riding the echoes along a long lost meridian to Rome—but first Egypt, Chichén Itzá, Tikal, Uqbar, Nibiru. From one sacred stack of stones to the next before succumbing to a grim diplacuisis echoica and settling down in an unruined flatland of the Philippines to haunt the clay. But Journius was soon driven to the entangling jungles by a nocturnal tide of disembodied billions groaning in unison from gone millennia. Diffracting vibrations waving, warping, fondling his mangled stereocilia like clouds of dark matter in fallout mode. Journius intoned their discordant ululations in the pre-classical style of a lorn prophet between the washed walls of a failing psych facility in Algiers. A sealed box of in-house recordings was stored in a dank antechamber beneath an ancillary New England lodge for “loner masons” en masse, and remained there, undisturbed for years prior to Christmas Day 1954 when a young journeyman, Brother Jimi Blank, purloined the complete avuncular set and vanished off the minute books for a decade or so. He resurfaced in Berkeley with some strange ideas set to stranger music and quickly accrued a loyal cult. Referring to themselves as both sound-seers and feel-firsters, the Blankheads were ruthlessly pious and made Jimi their messiah before he had a chance to trim his beard. But Jimi got lost inside himself more often than not and found out the easy way how to die young and leave a pretty corpus. His ex-lovers and former contemporaries would suck sugar cubes and undulate alongside the interlocking mandalas in the trees while his albums played on loop for days. Track 9 of his final performance at the Fillmore flipped Blankhead Sophie’s trauma-triggered impulse to turn off, tune out, drop in. Instead she laid her Glock down beside the phone and dialed seven digits. Her voice crept up on him like a creaking casquet, suicide in every syllable. Cashlock



spoke smack-soft to his ailing mother through a lay zome of heroin. His oozing words were deftly cached and curated by Sophie’s blanker half, fading neurons still firing true to form a system of sublingual configurations, all equating to the same essential communique: eternal love through supreme indifference. Sophie hung up and called the appropriate hotline. Cashlock OD’d. Finally shot through his filial inheritance. Murmurs of compound mourning rippled through the stately wake for Sophie’s second, Dorothy Blank, daughter of Dedalus, cooked up just prior to his patriotic departure. Dorothy’s three sons wept audibly with father Francis as her earthly remains were curtly interred. All three led long lives, worked hard and married fertile fems. Many Blanks bred thereafter, rippling out into the noumenal whorl like a flock of weobegone wavelengths, cloacal diversions of the field.

Second-come son of heady Soph and Jimi was special. Seymour could see no more, clinically speaking. Ontologically speaking, Seymour saw more than most. Inner nebulae of impossible symmetry in flux, subatomic commerce, the spirals talking, the spirals talking, the spirals talking—“God,” as his late granny Lucy insisted whilst she slipped through the zero to the not- her side like a solar flare in a looking glass. The quintessential nature of her othered soul mid- migration eluded any relevant lingual branding but could not escape the blindsight of Seymour’s black eyes, sucking, synching, vacuums of endless depth. Via quantum teleportation or some such as-yet-wholly-misapprehended extrasensory phenomenon. But, regardless of means and medium—whether rolling through the electric rainbow accelerators of his synesthete father’s magnum opus or transmuting the streaming crystaloblastic discharge of his great grandad’s M1—the subsequent Seymourian forms would transfigure Blank brainstems for generations to come. Bending and blending till sight was sound and the seen was one immanent paradigm. This text for instance. 🌀



JESSE KOMINERS is from DC but can't stop drifting. His work has appeared in *Burnside Review*, *Meat for Tea*, *Sleepingfish*, *Hypertrophic Literary* and elsewhere. Jesse is presently working on two unpublishable novels and a collection of short fictions.



Somebody is Killing The Oldest People in the World

Ray Nessly

Was Lily blessed with a film star’s looks? No, she wasn’t. But let me tell you, she’s a peach, one terrific woman. As I limp on wounded foot behind her, watching her vacuum the hallway of our cozy little house, I’m hard pressed to think of anyone—aside from Audrey Hepburn—I’d rather have shared these past 45 years with, than my wife, Lily. That’s “Lily” like the flower, the bulbous plant, L-i-l-y, as in Mrs. Ralph (“*Call me Lily, goddammit*”) Danforth, 72 years young if you’ll pardon the cliché, a good kisser and a decent lover, knocked the holy crap out of a 7-10 split at White Center Bowl last Easter Sunday, salt of the earth, and all that jazz.

Nobody in the Greater Sea-Tac area’s a better mom,

grandma, friend, wife. It’s just that . . . lately? I’m pretty sure she’s been trying to kill me. Just looking at her, you wouldn’t think she’s a murderess. No tattoos depicting violence. No pearl-handled derringer tucked into her support hose. Nothing suggests she was born to kill. She’s got lots of folks fooled: our daughter, the neighbors, the police, my pastor, her priest. Just another housewife pushing a vacuum cleaner around? I know better. Boy, do I. I’m tottering behind her in the hallway, waiting for a chance to duck into the bathroom with my Sunday paper. Look at me, a wounded veteran of wars foreign and domestic, toes decorated with Band-Aids: the loose ends

flapping like bloody flags. In fits and starts my parade zips along at the blistering rate of ten feet per hour. Up ahead, wide-wide Lily, in pink housedress, clogging hallway traffic, operating her Hoover as if it were a backhoe. Pink sleeves snipped to the armpits allow for free locomotion of enormous arms, the undersides saggy as turkey necks, swaying to and fro, her right arm manhandling the vacuum, and her (bandaged) left wholly devoted to clutching—and swirling—a can of beer. Sticking out of the can is a blue straw. Nice designer touch, sweetheart.

The hallway is dismal on a drizzly September morning, but Lily’s probably daydreaming, in garish Technicolor, the blood-red particulars of my future demise. Leaning her weight into the vac, she attacks the carpet with a punishing right jab, pulls back, and jabs again. She looks every bit the fighter, what with her dented nose—oh and check out those hands, all but three of her knuckles wrapped in Band-Aids. Another jab and another, both wattles a’ wiggling as she swirls her beer and brutalizes for minute after cruel minute a single square foot of unfortunate carpeting, smack dab in front of the bathroom door. Round one, the bell: a cuckoo inside her skull beats its wings against the bone. She pauses to slurp the straw.

I wonder if I’ll ever get into my little four by eight-foot sanctuary and “read the Sunday paper”—a euphemism for: I’ve been shoveling the All-Bran Flakes lately. I’m afraid to tap her wiggly backside and interrupt her for such a meager reason as “number two.” She’s got fifty, sixty pounds on me and she’s a head taller and I’d truly hate to guess how much wider. If she decides to discard all the prelims and just go ahead and attack me with those chubby hands, would I stand a chance? I would not.

Did I say that I’m “pretty sure” Lily’s been trying to kill me? Hoo boy, just goes to show how assault and battery can fuzzy up the insides of a good man’s head. I’m a tad more than “pretty sure.” Just Friday night, she tried to shove me face-first into the itty-bitty toaster oven along with the fish sticks. When that dog didn’t hunt (that’s something my ultra-quaint Grandpa Danforth used to say), Lily grabbed me and rammed my poor foot into the Cuisinart. Good thing my shoe slipped off. I got away, but what a mess, coleslaw and shredded sneaker all over the place. Anyway, last month? In the backyard? She about ran me down with the Sears rider mower going ninety. Tuesday, she attacked me with the electric drill. Mind you, I’ve always admired her creativity with power tools, but I deduce that she didn’t give her plan a great deal of thought. There she was, Lily with the Black & Decker, the biggest drill bit I ever saw, twirling, and the motor whining. And Banshee Lily, screaming something *perfectly* unintelligible, chasing me down this very same hallway until the extension cord popped out of the socket. Had the gall to ask me for a cordless Makita for her birthday. Don’t get your hopes up, Sweetie. Nothing from France in my house.

Of course, she might be cooking up an even gorier methodology. Maybe I should buy her that cordless. Sometimes she wears me down. Gets me wondering if I should give up, just let her do me in. She’s five years my senior, maybe she knows something I don’t know. Be that as it may, I’m only 67. A little wet behind the ears to die from nefarious, unnatural causes at the hands of a 210-lb. woman.

Lord knows what her batty head is scheming now, other than desiring to witness my sphincter explode right out of my butt, ricochet off the wall and poke out my eyeballs. I figure I can hold out, oh, another two, three minutes if I kind of bounce from foot to foot like I’m doing now. It’s a trick Grandma D. taught me. They had a teensy house like ours, with just the one bathroom. I have no idea why trotting in place helps, but it does. Everything gets backed up, maybe? Forgets where it’s supposed to go? Interesting theory.

Look at her. Gosh, unless it would spoil Lily’s plans, unless it would be rude of me, maybe I should just whack her first. What a fine blackjack my Sunday paper would make, the plastic bag heavy with Labor Day ads.

At last, the Hoover sucks up the pesky tangle of fur and whatnot on the hall carpet. Will

Lily move aside, clearing the way to the bathroom? That would be the Christian thing to do. But no, she’s pausing again to slurp her beer. And the can rattles along with her head whenever she puckers it, which is constantly. It’s a sound I know pretty well. Every day she slurps n’ puckers one or two cans of Bud. Oh, Lily? Sweetie? Don’t forget to slurp every last drop. Up your pretty straw it goes. Oh and whatever you do, don’t stop puckering. That’s it. Good. Pucker in and pucker out, a-one and a-two and in and out, *clack, clack*, and pucker that can, one and two and feel the burn, *clack* and *clack*. I can hear the noisy fruits of her addictions even though, to most ears, they’d be drowned out by the Hoover. She ignores the squawked howl, two pounds of compressed fur and coleslaw clogging the hose.

Not to mention the three TV sets she’s got blaring.

Yeah, some preacher’s yelling like God Himself on the living room 46-inch flat screen. In the bedroom, Mister Ed’s whinnying over a blown speaker on the old Panasonic. Got scads of wires hooking Ed up like a terminal patient to our ancient VCR: the display blinks **12:00, 12:00, 12:00** over and over like emergency room equipment. And on the seven-inch TV in the kitchen, Janet Yellen, tinier than ever, is talking interest rates on *Meet The Press*. Together, the TVs sound something like:

AND WITHOUT YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS
THE LORD’S WORK SHALL NOT BE DONE ON EARTH
AS IT IS IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY . . . Hellooooo there, Wilbur . . . accordingly, considering all indicators on the socioeconomic horizon, it is evident that monetary policy alone cannot . . .

Noisy. Why, I can barely make out the warped Ravi Shankar record that Lily’s got wobbling on the turntable. Weird, and scratched as all get out. Sounds like somebody’s making popcorn and murdering a cat.

It hits me. She’s trying to kill me with noise. Render me bonkers until I jump into the Buick, tires spinning wild as my eyes, the hood ornament aimed at a concrete freeway wall. Not a bad plan, Lily. This way you don’t hang.

LOCAL MAN MURDERED (INDIRECTLY). WIFE SHRUGS.

Nice plan, nice. Very clean. If only it weren’t so . . . noisy.

Lily slogs forward and I trot into the bathroom. Finally seated, I wad the classifieds, the obits. Bending down, I stuff them under the door for soundproofing. Chunks of Kleenex for earplugs. Bathroom fan on high. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Could be better, though. If only . . .

If only, say, the bathroom window wasn’t open a crack, with Lily’s burly cats taking advantage, clawing their way into the bathroom. Yes, if only twin kitties crossed 57 ways with bobcats and Norwegian forest trolls weren’t pushing the window up inch by inch as they hump each other on the windowsill. Ah, if only experimental critters weren’t simultaneously fighting and crapping now in their litter box crammed between the tub and toilet where I sit. And if only, if only, fummy bits of kitty litter weren’t flying out the box, bouncing off my bare-naked knees and into my drooped jeans and boxers. But they are.

Kill me, or drive me nuts, it gets me out of the picture.

Trying to kill you with what, Dad? Kindness?

Jeez, that’s the kind of touchy-feely cliché I get from Sarah, our daughter. From everybody, really. Lily’s a twinkle-eyed, ruddy-faced angel when company calls. But once folks scoot out our door, old Tinkerbelle’s giving me the heebie-jeebies, staring me down with those Mascara-smudged, mesmerizing eyes of hers. Last Christmas, right after Sarah left? Lily rummaged the kitchen drawers. Hand-cranking the eggbeater within an inch of my fleeing ass, she chased me down the hallway, chirping like, I don’t know—a radioactive chipmunk?

Mom’s always been a tad eccentric, sure. But c’mon, you’re exaggerating.

Jesus, take me now. Doesn’t anybody understand? Lily only acts like this around me.

Even the Lord doesn’t get it. The Man just rolls His eyes like everybody else and says, “Insufficient evidence.” I guess Lily’s got the Lord fooled too. If so, I’ve got a bridge over the Duwamish I could let Him have cheap. Sorry, I don’t mean to be sacrilegious. Sometimes sarcasm overtakes me. Lily’s got me rattled, I guess.

Where was I?—“Insufficient evidence,” my ass. What does everybody want, anyway? Lily’s signed confession? That’ll be the day. It’s like I told that guy downtown . . .

Lily and me, we’re like that old TV show.

Which TV show is that, Ralph?

Which show? Goddammit, that show with the talking horse, of course!

Easy, Ralph. Take a nice deep breath. That’s it. Better now? Good. Please continue.

The show with Mister Ed. The talking horse. Remember?

Of course. The famous Mister Ed.

Yeah. In the show there’s this talking horse. That’s odd, agreed?

Odd, indeed. Unless, of course, in case the horse is the famous Mister Ed.

Yeah. Anyhow, every time this Wilbur guy drags someone over for a listen, the horse shuts up. Acts normal, la-di-dah, ho-hum. So everybody thinks Wilbur’s nuts. But he isn’t, I’m telling you.

Go on.

Well, the way I see it? That’s pretty much Lily and me.

Hmm . . . ?

I’m Wilbur. She’s Mister Ed.

Ah.

Sure, it sounds bad. I got bent out of shape with the guy.

I was under stress. Still, my point remains: I don’t need professional help.

Okay, I’m “done” with the bathroom now, vis-à-vis my number one reason for being here: *number two*. But even though the toilet seat’s starting to feel hard and Viral’s snoring in the litter box and Feral’s got his sticky mug in my lap, I figure the bathroom’s still the place to be. It’s the place *not* to be seen in—by Lily. I’m settled in for what I hope will be, say, a two hour session with my Sunday paper. Just wish I knew where the crossword puzzle page ran off to. I whisper sweet nothings to Feral (Viral? who can tell with twins?), trying to coax him (her? it?) to stop burrowing into my crotch so I can

drag my boxers and jeans up nice and easy. That’s what I’m trying to do anyway . . . Hmm. A knock at the door. Oh, who could it be? Before I can say anything, the door opens a crack, and out pops a straw then a can of beer, and finally, Lily’s hand, poking through the ever-widening gap.

This is it. She’s coming for me. My fingers push the earplugs into my brain.

Jeez, and here comes our dog Cleo too. Her paws shove the door wide-open, one hundred pounds of mutt galloping toward me, and the Frankenstein cats all spit and claws leaping right over her as the doorknob slams into the wall. The litter box flips end-over-end in midair like the bone in *2001*. Cleo’s paw whaps my head, jolts the earplugs out of me. She backs up and her big tail knocks the toilet paper off the wall, the roll in mid-air unraveling sheet by sheet down to the little cardboard tube bouncing off the ceiling, and TP swirls down like confetti in a rainstorm of kitty litter, what with the box descending, and landing, in the tub. Cleo’s got the TP tube in her mouth. Chews it like a two-cent cigar.

And God, there’s Lily. Her vacuum cleaner howls. With a flick of the switch she shuts evil Hoover down. Off goes the bathroom fan too. I hear bodiless ghouls in the distance: The television preacher, Janet Yellen, and Ravi. And Mister Ed: *Hellooooo there, stranger.*

Lily squeezes into the doorway, muffling the noise somewhat. *What’s YOURRRRRR name, buddy?*

She swirls her beer. And, of course, she puckers the can. She takes one last big slurp. Tosses the empty can into the bathtub. The clatter fades.

“Mornin’, Ralph.”

Carol, come quick. The horse, it’s . . . talking!

I nod my head. “Lily.”

“Cleo wanted in.”

“You don’t say?” Keep in mind that Cleo’s nuzzling my crotch with the TP tube clenched in her teeth. And I’m on the toilet, jeans and boxers slumped on the floor, hands



pushing to keep the dog from sheathing my penis with a cardboard condom.

“Woooo,” Lily says, pinching her nose. “How do you stand the smell? Fuckin’ cats . . .” She tilts her head, looks at me oddly. This is exactly what I don’t want. Ninety-five percent of the time, it means she’s up to no good. I look down, avoiding her stare.

“You okay, Ralph?” *Wilbur, are you ... okay?*

I’m rubbing the carpet with my good foot. Swirled patterns in the kitty dust. “Yup.”

“Need TP?”

The bathroom a cobweb of unraveled toilet paper. “Fine in that department, Lily.”

“What a mess,” she says nasally, still pinching her nose. “Sheesh.”

“Yup.” I look up at her. “Messed up *bad*.”

Lily lets go of her nose. “I’m gonna get you tidy.”

“Actually? I’d prefer—”

“Gimme your pants,” Lily says.

Gritting my teeth: “No, really. I—”

“Now, Ralph.” She’s wiggling her fingers, palms up, that impatient *c’m on, c’m on* gesture. “Shorts too,” she says. “Now.”

I grab the toilet like a jet pilot enduring emergency seat ejection. “No.”

She yanks my jeans off. Boxer shorts too.

“Okay,” she says, brushing the litter off. “That’s better. Want me to throw yer clothes in the warsh? *Tide* warshes ‘em sparkly clean, eh?”

“No, thanks.”

Holding my boxers, she pokes her fingers through the ripped cotton. A bloody kitty tooth falls to the carpet. “Mend ‘em for ya?”

“Thank you, no,” I whisper.

Lily shakes her head. “I better warsh ‘n mend ‘em.”

I nod. *Sure, okay, whatever.*

“Best I vacuum your little ‘den’ too, eh?”

“Oh, it’s not so bad in here, really. I—”

“Legs up. Now.”

I comply. Lily tortures me with humiliation, pushing the screaming vac back and forth under my outstretched legs. Adding injury to insult, she bumps into my bandaged toes, the Hoover like a humongous splinter shoved under my nails. Ouch. But mostly, it’s the humiliation. She’s swabbing my groin with a washcloth clutched in her left hand, dammit. I grab the washcloth, fling it against the wall. She raises an eyebrow. Shuts the Hoover beast off.

I jump up. “Lily, gimme my shorts.” They’re on her head. Like a chef’s hat, only filthy.

Pulling Hoover backward, Lily unblocks the doorway. Preacher, Janet, Ravi, Mister Ed, in cacophonous harmony. Switch on again, Hoover screams. Cleo’s on her back in the doorway now, begging for a tummy rub. I climb over her. Ten feet ahead: Lily. Her right flabby appendage—arm—pushes Hoover into the living room, my jeans draped over her left arm. Hoover sniffs Feral and Viral’s trail, sucks up gobs of fur and countless specks of kitty litter.

In the living room, Lily’s stuffed into her chair. Hoover, upright, like a loyal harpy sitting next to its master. Lily with a hook shot: my jeans into the hamper. My ripped

boxers on her head, she reaches for needle and thread. The TV blares ... AND THE SODOMITES SUFFERED THE WRATHFUL RAIN OF ...

Wounded inside and out, I stumble half-naked across the living room, dragging my bandaged foot. Toilet paper clings to me in shreds. I look like the Mummy.

“Look what the cats dragged in,” Lily says with a giggle. “Sit, Ralph, sit.”

I totter past my recliner chair. Slide the glass patio door open. Shut it behind me. But I can make out her every word. “Where ya going, handsome?”

On the patio, I collapse into my lawn chair. Something brown and stinky is smeared on the armrest. Drizzled rain tap-taps the patio cover. Or what’s left of it. Broken sheets of corrugated plastic, in a pile. Big windstorm last month. The wreckage rattles softly now in the late-morning breeze. Slugs ooze across the concrete, gray on gray. In the distance, a dog barks once, twice, and stops. My sweater, my legs—and my privates—are moist with drizzled rain.

I hear the patio door slide open. Lily. Still wearing my boxing shorts like a hat. “Hi, Ralph.”

Nodding my head, I say, “Lily.”

She’s looking at me with whirlpools for eyes when I notice her knife ...

Big knife.

The one she uses for ripping salmon wide-open. Belly to frowning mouth.

Time passes as in a fever dream. We’ve been staring at each other for, what, an hour?

No, hours. Long enough to get soaked by mist. Must be afternoon by now? No, it’s later. Everything getting dark. Dusk.

All this time. Has she even budged? Raven hair hangs in wet twists over her face. Knife

... big knife.

Early evening raga: Rain on roof. Eaves dripping. Drizzle on broken patio, on broken man. I am damaged and so is my Lily.

“Ralph? You ... okay?”

“Fine. Perfect,” I say with a shrug. “Let’s get this over with.” *C’m on, C’m on*, I gesture.

She unfolds a lawn chair, sits down, facing me. Knife on the armrest, she’s ... unbuttoning her dress? And I’m squinting (*What the ... ?*) as she reaches into her vast bosom. Pulls out a huge slab of something. Brown. Hard-looking. She jabs one end of it into her mouth, clenches it with her teeth. Knife an inch from her lips, she saws at the brownish slab. “Jerky, Ralph?”

Beef jerky! She’s cutting mystery meat with a knife—like an Eskimo eats half-frozen chunks of walrus gut.

“Um?” she asks, chewing. “Try some. Good stuff. Pike Market.”

I sigh, leaning back in my chair, and I sigh again, my face catching the mist. Looking at her now, I shake my head. “Boy oh boy, Lily. You are one weird lady.”

“Thank you”—reaching into her bosom again—“Oh, and I have something for you.”

“Oooh, what is it?” I ask. “Aside from being a wad of crumpled newspaper, I mean.”

“Found it under the bathroom door. Your crossword’s in

that section, I think.”

“Oh, Lily, you shouldn’t have.” I’m unraveling the newspaper as if it were a gift.

“How droll,” she starts to say, but squints. “Hey look, it happened again.”

“What happened?”

She taps the newspaper with the blade. “The obits: OLDEST WOMAN PASSES.”

“Again?” I ask, watching her grin back at me. It’s a stupid little joke between us. A few months ago the oldest person in the world died, passing the death torch to someone else. Preordained to go belly-up on this joyous Labor Day holiday weekend.

Lily says, “News flash. Somebody is killing the oldest people in the world.”

“Or something,” I offer. “Something is killing them.”

Lily, with a mock shudder: “Could it be ... old age?”

“Anything but that,” I say, with a giggle. Jesus. One minute she’s trying to kill me with noise, the next we’re sharing a laugh. Maybe I’m just as nuts as she is? ... Naw.

“Lily? Why have you been trying to kill me?”

“Have I been?” She sets the knife on the armrest.

“We’ve been over this, what—twenty times? There’s proof everywhere. Machete jutting from the headboard. My poor exploded pillow. Coleslaw and bits of shoe under the dinette table.

Christ, you shoved my foot into the Cuisinart, remember? And you must’ve dumped a whole bottle of skull n’ bones in my cereal the other week. What, you didn’t think I’d notice *red* milk?”

“I, I don’t remember any of this stuff.”

“That’s because you’re ... oh, forget it.”

“I already did forget. I don’t remember it. Remember?”

I pause and say, “Lily, I want you to know something. I appreciate you being so sloppy. Sloppy about trying to kill me, I mean.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Wiping my brow and lap, I look at the overcast sky. It’s not especially cold out, but I feel a shiver coming on. “You know, Lily, there’s advantages to dying. Heaven and all that.”

“I believe you’d look dapper in a toga.”

“Thanks. You know, my grandma liked to say, ‘Even if we could live forever? It wouldn’t be long enough to understand.’ She believed that everything makes sense in the hereafter. And the answers to all things perplexing (like say, *Why the hell are you trying to kill me, Lily?*) are scribbled on the clouds.”

“Your grandma said that? I never met her.”

“Point is, I don’t want to live forever. Overrated. And

who wants to die? Not me. But I would like a crack at hanging on just long enough to figure you out. The day I understand you, Lillian J. Danforth, is the day I go ... peacefully.”

“Oh, Ralph. Let’s talk to whoever’s oldest now. The secrets of living a long, long time.”

I grab the newspaper. “Says here the oldest person in the world is some geezer in Minnatonka, Minnesota.”

“Oh, Ralph, let’s go. They gotta airport?”

“Maybe. I suppose we can get close enough, anyway. Just rent a car and—Oh hell, what am I saying? Let’s just hop in the Buick and take a road trip.”

“Road trip!” Lily slaps her giant hands together. “Oh, I really could use a vacation, Ralph.”

“You got it, Sweetie. Of course, I better let you drive.”

“Hmm?”

Smiling, I point a finger at her. “So I can keep an eye on YOU at all times.”

“Ralph, how nice.”

“Well, you deserve it. Really, you do.”

“Oh, Ralph ...”

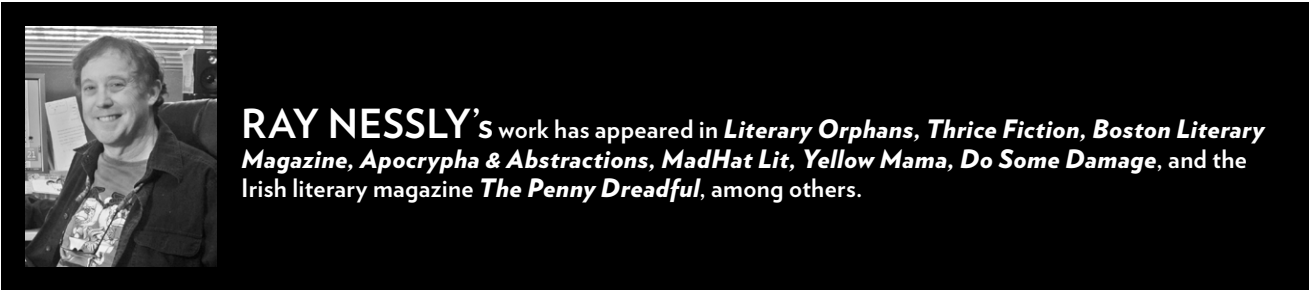
“Lily.” As I nod my head, she’s grinning at me. Her eyes, I’m caught in them—a bug in a drain, swirling around the rim and down, along with the rain. And her wet hair is almost beautiful. Nothing like Audrey Hepburn’s hair, mind you. And no way would I mistake Lily’s arms for slim Audrey’s in ritzy evening gloves. But her hair, it’s, its ... almost pretty, hanging wet over her brow, and her dented nose. And her mesmerizing eyes, too, are almost pretty and—

I pull away from her eyes. Down, down, down ...

Her chubby right hand. Making a move for the knife.

I leap out of my lawn chair, fingers curled, aimed at her neck.

And I hear Lily. Nothing but Lily. Screaming something perfectly unintelligible. 🗣️





Crawl

Norbert Kovacs

We crawl naked, belly on the ground, going up the hill in the woods. Our legs cannot rise though they bend and push; our feet are hobbled. We move as a group, all twisted in one heap. Reaching with our arms, we claw, dig and scratch at the earth to pull ourselves forward. We cross atop each other's bodies as we go. One of us clamors with legs wriggling across the back of another. We never stop at it. We press in front of our companions, every one of us itching to make the head of the group.

We seize at the things we see our comrades seize. A man puts his hand on the rock that the man beside him tries to grasp. A woman reaches for the plant the woman beside her tries to eat. As we worm ahead, a churning nest of bodies, we piss and defecate, smearing it on each other with glee. We yell, cry, whimper and growl by turns more than we bother ever to speak.

Our group takes a jagged course up the hill. One man lurches past a tree; his neighbors ride over his back the quicker. A strong fellow elbows over some weeds and the rest grasp and tug at him, so that he jerks side to side. We reach the hilltop in due order. The strong man who had ploughed up the hill is exhausted. He has cut his arms and sides on rock and bleeds. Bruises darken his head and legs. A tall woman starts our group down the hill's other side. She had been dragged up the hillside with the group more than she had crawled. She descends the hill with arms pulling her quickly, easily. We press forward, rolling around her body.

At the hill bottom, most of us stop moving. The idea seems that we make this where we rest overnight. However, some of us continue to squirm. They mean to move on. They have no plan to stay at this place. The rest of us will not have it. We beat and pummel the ones squirming until they quit. It would ruin our group if some went without the rest, we know very well.

Our group settles in for the night. We lay together in

an oppressive heap. An elbow digs into our ribs for every back on which we set our heads. Some of us say we must lie so to keep warm. The closeness of our idle, naked bodies has its effects. More than a few are moved to have sex. One man even commits rape. These hurried acts end as the night darkens and we lie still. Those who remain awake hear the stifled sob or whimper of somebody pressed under the heap. The rest of us sleep if brokenly. Some dream of walking through the fields beside companions still crawling the earth.

We go in the morning. We argue about the place ahead of us toward which we crawl. "It must be a light," the strong man says, squinting into the distance.

"Too dim for one," the tall woman answers quickly. "More like a cave."

"It's a shadow," a second man calls from the group side. "The shadow of a hill."

"No, a pool," a woman says next. "A blue pool."

So the debate about our progress ebbs and flows.

We advance over a plateau, our bodies heating each other and the ground under us. Finally, we reach where we had headed, a cliffside. The men who had pushed hardest to get here grow quiet. They raise their heads to study the scene though only inches above the earth. Their quiet survey does not last. Soon, a number of us are snarling, scoffing. A woman spits at the men who scan the place. A thin fellow ruffles the dust nearby. The two toss about as if rearing to leave. But enough of us keep still that we stay and wait. We will not abandon our hope this soon that we have reached our journey's end however much crawling on is in our blood. ☺



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Nest

Dina Greenberg

In a dream my mother comes to me as a small bird. After my father's decline, his undignified death, she is clothed in the downy feathers of a fledgling. She darts from windowsill to ceiling, from scratched-dirt floor to tree limb, skeletoned of leaves or berries or blossoms. The

bark stripped smooth with no place to nest. This outside-in room, sealed tight as a coffin. She swoops and dips and skitters, her path erratic as that long-ago marriage.

Her wings flap hard at the glass. Does she see her reflection there? A 1950s housewife. Bobby socks, pixie haircut. Just a hair's breadth past childhood and corralled. Brick ranch house and two toddlers: me, my brother. Our father: back from the war, handsome and silent and angry.

A young girl and then an older one, I'd wake to my mother's words. Night after night they slashed the felted darkness, my father's baritone leaden with unspent pain. Years passed and two more siblings arrived. My mother roosted. She flew. She returned. They parted ways, came together decades later. Companions.

Now she tires, rests, tires, rests. My mother's paled feathers float on the draft till they settle to the dust below. And when her strength returns, she flies at the window with all she can muster, her caged fury sharp as the splinters of glass that pierce her avian heart. ⑤



DINA GREENBERG's writing has appeared in *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and *Barely South*, among others. Dina earned her MFA in fiction from the University of North Carolina Wilmington, where she served as managing editor for the literary journal *Chautauqua*. She teaches creative writing at the Cameron Art Museum in Wilmington, NC. Read more of her work at DinaGreenberg.com



The Uphill Mansion

Cristina Bresser de Campos

The luminosity that came through the window, barely touched few objects, it almost produced no shadows. I knew well the pitfalls of that rebellious house that revenged the years of misuse by clicking worn floor planks, echoing secrets by thin partitions newly installed, watering rain by the holes of the chandeliers, for long opaque of dust and loneliness.

I find the two of you in each wave that breaks on the rocks, in each ember that jumps from the fireplace, trying to burn the carpet after I could finally revive the fire. You left me when I was distracted, before I could finish the thought. You should have treated better your remaining days. As time went by, you should have grown better your pleasures and shut your pains more frequently. You should not put at risk the hours that you had left on this earth.

You were as an idea that is in the bottom of one's mind and do not come true, a faded stain on an ancient history, something that could have been, it wasn't the emptiness of having almost have happened. The more I looked around the more the past sprang from the floor and grabbed my feet.

Long ago, the room had been filled with shadows in sensual moves designed by candles, with wine, some low music and high expectations. The silence between my parents pointed out the intimacy of bodies and souls that had meshed for centuries. The aroma there was formerly of summer in the mountains, oriental lilies merged with cypresses, more or less like the floral scent of her perfume and his citrus fragrance in a harmonious blend, never broken, not even with my birth.

My memory, as much as I try to silence it, holding it in an attic of the past, would come back like a wounded wild animal, spiteful and lethal. Each room had a smell, which referred me to an occasion, a voice, a feeling. No room was lacking in memories. Some, even closed, had the smell of breeze and the light of noon. Other rooms, on the

contrary, they stunk the neglect, the disaffection, dark as the deception were.

The crying had left me so dehydrated that if somebody looked angrily at me or spoke out loud with me, I could become a pile of sand, ready to be swept up by an idea of wind. And it wouldn't even have to be the South Wind. Any evening breeze would be enough to take me, I, dust, away. But I still needed to cry. I was drowning in a whirlpool, sucked into the bottom of the sea, but the tears that were not extruded, caused an implosion and tore my throat.

In the library, many volumes never opened aged. As well as the ancient inhabitants of the House, they were turning yellow and had lost their value, despite their timeless content. Books written to ward off ignorance that had their purpose frustrated by fear of awakening subversive ideas, ideas that subverted that peace, so synthetic as the imitation leather covers of some volumes there. The more they advanced in age, the more my parents got frightened of life and more caution they took to extend their happy days. That was what I imagined at that time.

Every summer spent in that House, the sense of a childhood only dreamed of, the melancholy of another new year artificially celebrated between fireworks and sparkling wine, was distressing. All those feelings that were unlikely to reach the surface, for fear of catching the glottis, were now attacking me. The familiar hauntings wouldn't leave with the dawn that morning. They were the true owners of the House. I was the invader, the cuckoo that has long gone from the nest imposed to me since my birth.

How to explain that jumble of intangible emotions, tangled and, at the same time, so well muffled by the superb pose that I had acquired to survive? It was like the sadness of losing a friend not yet conquered or for an unprecedented and sorely missed trip. That nostalgia that always pervaded in the days of my birthday was a not welcome gift, but at the same time, it was always expected, for being granted. Today was not the day that would mark a new year of my life, but

the feeling in the pit of my stomach was just like that, since I had accepted to come back to that place. Why?

Because I was arrogant to the point of thinking that I had overcome all hatred contained in the memories of that family. My family. Mine? I couldn't imagine that the ghosts of that House would also be able to reject me. But they were. They were rejecting me from the moment I opened the front door half stuck in the sand brought by the wind and accumulated during months of abandonment.

The only unchanged thing there was the silence. For many years, those frozen features in neglect, those looks through myself as if I were immaterial, the words of love never spoken nor the words of disaffection, made me wake up feverish, in the middle of the night. I woke up bewildered, with my skin attached to the sheet and a mouthful of sludge.

The only child of an always-absent mother and of an estranged father. Created by nannies, maids and butlers, captive of the glazed beachfront mansion. The Aquarium. I called it that way, to my father's chagrin and the derision of my mother. I should never have been born, but now I was here and the need of crying was not over yet.

What a Justice of the peace united, in their case, not even death did part. Would it have been a pact? If it had been so, how could they deceive the autopsy? Inconclusive. Just as they have always been, to me. I thought that last night, the shadows would come to pick me up. Such a sad pretension. Not even after death, they cared about me.

From the desk drawer not properly shut, the tip of a white envelope provokes me, challenges me to grab it and open it. The paper is of good quality. It has his name engraved on the top, but it's her handwriting that wrote my name on it.

Who knows, after all, by the words she had left written there, it would be revealed to me how this woman, my mother, felt, thought, what worried her, what moved her, but mostly, what she expected from me. Because, even after so many years, deep down, what I wanted was her approval. Not love. That was all meant to my father. My mother's approval would suffice. Then I wouldn't be an imitation of her arrogance, and I would get a purpose for my transit in this world.

How much it hurt, just by looking at my name written in that butter color envelope with my mothers' precise handwriting. The exact pressure, the secure cut at the letter T, showing determination. Large and wide letters at the bottom, giving of her sexual disinhibition, in contrast with the triangular shaped A, demonstrating her authoritarianism. The C well wrapped up, closing the analysis, was a clear sign of her selfishness. How hard I tried to figure out my mother.

My mother, a stranger that just gave me clues about whom she was by her calligraphy or during the nights of celebration driven by the champagne. When she drank, I was able to see some cracks of affection in the retaining wall that she wore to impound her feelings, whatever they were, about me. I miss those few days when she looked at me and recognized me as her daughter. Even she got surprised then.

The envelope in my hand became wet, and I noticed my tears, piling up one on top of each other, causing a salty flurry without expiration time. But even so, her writing didn't fade. On the contrary, the effect of blue ink was intensified on that bond paper. It looks like I aged a lot since yesterday. Or was it since last week?


I need coffee. Coffee that burns my tongue and makes me feel pain, makes me feel human. Caffeine will inject me a sense of reality, of focus. The kitchen was inaccessible for me since forever but not today. I find the kettle, the colander and the powder in the places where they should be. I'm not surprised. I open the lid of the stove, the matches next to it, ready to serve me. I turn on the gas, I scratch the match against the matchbox. The fire becomes the sole source of warmth, of light.

The rectangular shape of the envelope stands out of my pocket. The paper is still wet, as is my face. The flames of that stove are as undisciplined as the embers of the fireplace. Rebel House, distant owners. The only heat produced there was by the combustion of gas, or wood. Even after death, they could make me feel like an outsider. I, the uninvited guest who crashed the party that was only for the two of them. I have always been left aside in that place. In the House, in their life and even in their death. Excluded until the end.

The cry of pain and the smell of burning flesh from my fingers calls my attention to the ashes scattered at the top of the stove. The only part of her handwriting, readable now, was the T of my name well cut.

The sense of not belonging has become unbearable. It was increasingly difficult to inspire that heavy air. I was able to survive for too long in that tank with little oxygen, taken from the world by crystal walls. It was time to resume my life so hardly won, away from that sovereign House. I would leave it one more time for its true inhabitants.

The anguished cries coming from outside confirmed the climate change. I pulled the door wide open, and my face dried up with the slap of the South wind. I should resent it, but I hugged the wind, and I let myself be pushed away from that cold mansion by the sea. 🌊



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The Quentin Pizza

Catherine Sinow

Every piece in Erika's art show involved the name "Quentin." Seven dancers wearing leotards reading Q, U, E, N, T, I, and N performed a tap routine. A black tunnel ran a whole room's length, speakers playing people uttering "Quentin" in all conceivable tones. There was a computer you could go on with a fake version of Facebook, and every one of your 452 friends was the exact same Quentin.

I joined Erika by the front of the gallery. A circular white pin reading "QUENTIN" stuck to her breast pocket.

"I like what you've done this time around," I told her, grabbing a cookie with "Quentin" iced onto its surface.

"Thanks a bunch, Theo," she said. "This one definitely took some mental expansion. Lots of mediums involved!"

"So, what does Quentin think of all of this?" I asked. "Can't be sure. No contact so far."

"Are you worried about some kind of lawsuit or

restraining order?"

"Actually, that would be great. I'm not going to give it all away yet, but the second part of The Quentin Project will be performance-based."

I walked home, contemplating the quietude of closed stores and gazing up at house parties on 4th floor apartments. One blasted the song "Moves Like Jagger" and I found myself feeling alienated.

I crossed the street a few times to avoid looming shadows. I attempted to avoid puddles on the sidewalk and failed. A few blocks before home, I heard Moves Like Jagger again. I looked around; there was no party or other human being to be seen, yet the song felt so nearby. It followed me into my building and only disappeared when I clicked the door to my apartment shut.

At my job interview the next day, I sat across one woman

and one man in a back room piled with filing cabinets and old mops. The man had a tall face and a necktie with green hexagons on it. The woman had short hair in loose curls and a strange glassy-eyed look to her.

“So, what brings you to HexaRoni?” asked the woman.

“I guess I just enjoy pizza,” I said. “I think I could bring a lot to your company. I’m a quick worker.”

“But you should know that we are not an ordinary pizza company,” said the man.

“That’s right,” said the woman. “Our pies are exclusively in the shape of hexagons!” She and the man looked at one another, smiling uncontrollably.

“I saw that when I walked in,” I said. “And on the website, too.”

“A six-sliced pie is just so convenient,” she said. “You can eat one piece per person if you’re a party of six, two pieces per person if you’re a party of three, or three pieces per person if you have a party of two and you’re feeling mighty hungry! And our chefs know just where to cut! None of that frightening ambiguity of that undefined, slippery circle.” She shuddered as she thought of this shape.

“I think it’s a pretty revolutionary tactic,” I said.

“Do you enjoy hexagons?” asked the woman, in the way that some would ask “Do you know Jesus?”

“I think they’re a good shape,” I said. “Definitely better than octagons.” Then the woman put her hands over her ears and started to scream. The man reached over and grasped her shoulders, compassionately whispering “Six sides, six sides, everything will be alright.” She eventually took her hands off her ears and opened her eyes, hyperventilating.

“We don’t like to speak of the eight-sided polygon here,” he said.

I apologized. “How much do you guys pay?” I asked.

The two perked up, having apparently recovered from the octagon incident. “We may not pay a six-figure salary, but we do pay a six sided salary,” the man said, grinning. He and the woman smiled and nodded at one another.

“What does that mean? How can a salary be six-sided?”

“Hexagon,” said the woman.

“Hexagon,” said the man.

“Do I have the job?” I asked.

“Hexagon,” they said in unison.

My training involved a lot of dough throwing. It made my arms feel weak and I almost (but not quite) fantasized about making spreadsheets at a desk. I did find myself competent at taking fistfuls of mozzarella and sprinkling it all over pizzas, so I figured this was something to be proud of. Before long, I was hard at work making “HexaPies” and topping them with hexagon-shaped pepperoni (we called it “HexaPepperoni” to avoid confusion with the name of the store, HexaRoni, which itself was also a portmanteau of “hexagon” and “pepperoni”).

“Who cuts the HexaPepperonis?” I asked my silent and serious coworker Mitch. I said this quickly since he seemed like the kind of person who would snap if asked to exert emotional energy.

“Guy over in Petaluma,” he said, keeping his head down. “We have connections.”

I was just starting to wonder if there was a HexaMafia when the shift manager announced that they needed

another person on delivery.

While driving the HexaRoni Mini Cooper, Moves Like Jagger came on the radio. I switched the station, annoyed, only to find Moves Like Jagger on the other station. I grumbled and turned it off. Then I realized that my next delivery was for Shampoooch and my heart jumped into my throat.

Shampoooch had ordered three pizzas. When I got there, I opened up the box on top of the stack. Surely enough, half was a normal, hexagon-shaped pizza suited for human consumption, and the other half looked like frozen dirt and smelled like dog kibble.

I walked into the salon, where I saw Quentin soaping up a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. He and Erika had dated for three years when we all attended college. Now he was an entrepreneur with three dog washes to his name.

“Take over for me, Nickerson!” he snapped, and a guy mopping the floor quickly ran to the Retriever. Quentin tipped me \$5 and set the pizzas out on a table. Humans and dogs flocked. He came back and stood next to me, implying he didn’t have to be anywhere anytime soon.

“So how’s it going, Theo?” he asked. He was buff, tan, and covered in tattoos of tropical plants and woodland creatures.

“Not bad,” I said. “Just working at HexaRoni.”

“I always knew you would never amount to anything with that Anthropology degree,” he said.

“I had a minor in Geographical Information Systems,” I replied.

“Say,” he said, his muscles flexing a little. “I heard you and Erika have been hanging out.”

“As a matter of fact, we have been. She actually had a lot to say about you in her new exhibit,” I said, trying to brag about my connection with her. We were so close that I even went to her art opening! Except she had sent the invite to all 300 of her Facebook friends in our city.

“I do know of that exhibit,” Quentin said, twirling a rubber dog bone around his finger. “My friend’s actually writing a review of it.”

“You going to file a restraining order?” I said, hopeful that he would so he could jump-start the performance segment of her art.

“She’s harmless,” he said, doing a sweeping motion with his veiny, hairy right hand. “All I gotta do is hold my head high and live my life.”

“It doesn’t even make you feel, well, hurt?”

“You know, why do you keep asking me about her? You like her, don’t you?” I felt myself turn red.

“It’s always been a ‘just friends’ arrangement,” I said. “I love her like a sister.”

I once tried to send Erika a love letter. I didn’t know how stamps worked and I put a sparkly duck sticker in the corner. It was returned to me two weeks later.

“Say what you want to say, Theo,” said Quentin. I glanced over at Nickerson, who was blow-drying a Maltese in the back of the shop. “Erika is a charming, talented woman and it makes all the sense in the world to love her.”

I drove back to HexaRoni listening to the classical station. Over the course of five minutes on the road, the orchestra smoothly transitioned from a Bach symphony to an orchestral interpretation of Moves Like Jagger. I raised

one of my eyebrows in disgust and turned off the radio.

The next day on my lunch break, I gorged on a veggie HexaPie while reading the local paper. It was then that I saw it.

Obsessive ‘Art’ Show Creepy, Not Artistic

My heart dropped into my stomach as I read this article by Tom Teitelbaum. He was, simply put, not into the gimmick.

“Seeing the same name just got boring after a while,” he admitted. “It’s my brother’s name, too. He was the favorite child. I’ve heard it enough!”

I seethed with fury.

When my grueling cheese-sprinkling shift finally ended at six, I stayed for a while longer and crafted a HexaPie. I sort of wanted to make it a circle, but I knew that might cause everyone in the building to need emergency psychiatric attention, so I stuck with the six-sided shape. I made a 10” HexaPie with HexaPepperoni arranged into the name “Quentin.” I got in my beat-up car and drove to Erika’s apartment.

I decided not to ring her buzzer for an element of surprise. Instead I waited outside the building for someone to leave so I could slip in after them. This opportunity came via a scruffy middle-aged man who eyed me suspiciously. I took the stairs to Erika’s floor and knocked on her door, which she had adorned with a Gustav Klimt poster.

She opened the door. She wore a periwinkle kimono, hair tied up messily with tears streaming down her cheeks. It seemed that she had too learned of Tom Teitelbaum earlier today.

“Theo!” she exclaimed, embracing me and almost making me drop the pizza box.

“I thought you could use some cheering up,” I said. We went inside and I showed her my creation.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. She ran over to the coffee table and grabbed her film camera. She snapped a photo of me holding the pizza, which made me feel vulnerable.

We sat on her couch and ate the HexaPie. “Do you ever hear the song Moves Like Jagger a little too often?” I asked her.

“That song is totally overplayed,” she said.

“I’m talking more like, hearing it at really odd times.”

“Don’t think I’ve experienced that,” she said. “But that song sure is weird, huh? I mean, Mick Jagger kind of sucks at dancing. Why couldn’t it have been about Michael Jackson?”

“I think they’re talking about, uh, sex moves,” I said, realizing I had just spoken about sex in Erika’s presence. She blushed a little. Maybe Moves Like Jagger was like a

metaphysical spirit guiding me toward Erika’s love.

We played a round of Scrabble. I played the word quilts, which I was proud of, but she came back with flapjack on a triple-word square, which cost me the game. We drank the boxed wine she kept under her sink and made a collage out of medication advertisements in her magazine basket. I think she might actually be into me, I thought, noticing how she nuzzled up to my shoulder while applying Elmer’s Glue.

We found the newspaper’s address online and mailed Tom Teitelbaum one of these collages, prominently featuring a new medication for high blood pressure.

“I hope he needs to actually take these pills soon,” she said with a dash of fury in her eye.

“Now now,” I told her, feeling buzzed and cuddly as hell. “Please don’t wish for other people to get illnesses that prohibit them from eating muffins.” I found myself inching closer to her.

“How tasteless of me,” she said. And with that, I fell into her arms.

We held one another for a good ten minutes, saying nothing. When I finally spoke, I felt my throat creaking as if I hadn’t talked in hours.


“If we have an drawn-out romantic relationship that ends in a breakup in several years,” I said, “will you make an art exhibit about me?”

“I couldn’t say,” she said. “But if I do, don’t be surprised if it’s just 200 pizzas.”

“Oh you,” I said. I watched her slowly doze off, and I found myself thanking the gods for this little marvel of nature. I was drifting off myself when Adam Levine’s head poked through the window, his hands curled around the windowsill. He began singing the chorus of Moves Like Jagger, a bluebird on his shoulder accompanying him during the whistling part.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “Get out! This is my moment!”

“Sorry, pal,” he said, and he lowered himself. His hands and head slipped out of view, leaving me to fall asleep to the sound of chirping crickets and Erika’s nose-breathing. 🐛



CATHERINE SINOW is a recent graduate of Colorado College, where she majored in fiction writing. She resides in her hometown of San Diego, figuring out what she wants to do with her life as well as listening to copious ambient music and making zines. Her other work can easily be found by Googling her name, as she is the only Catherine Sinow who has ever lived.



Littering Conflict

Meg Tuite

Everything is large and empty in the house when she gets home from the writing workshop except for books. A distortion of colors and shapes lined up along bookshelves all over the living room and her bedroom like so many eyes wondering what she is going to do with her day. Probably not read. Minutes spread out in a long pulsating hangover. Why does a calendar suffocate each room? A day is a day is a day would be a Gertrude Steinian effigy. She slugs coffee. Themes search through her like a Rolodex. Death. Life. Love. Hate. Time. Speedball. Caffeine wracks through the system until there's no choice but to expel something of significance.

She grabs a magazine with an article about a kidnapping and sits on the toilet for a while. Sometimes the best work comes from the media. The crying husband's rheumy eyes showcase his guilt, but it will take them a year or so to figure that out. They'll drag out the conflict, until one day there is action and resolution and that guy with the haircut of a five-year-old will lose the dimples and his latest wife.

If the planet is so absurd then why shouldn't her writing mimic it. Conflict cows inside her stomach. She has stories. A man comes close to attacking her. It is an evening holding a bag of groceries and wearing headphones on her way home at dusk. The man moves closer every time she looks behind her. She picks up her pace and when she turns again his arms are over her head. She screams 'fire' and throws her bag at him. The bag hits the guy's face. He runs. A soup can rolls under her heel and knocks her back on the cement. It is her, the torn paper bag, bread, milk, cans, and a cracked bottle of wine. Aren't people supposed to run out when they hear the word 'fire'? Well, that is just one agonizing moment of many. Really, if she razors through her thoughts she finds more humiliation and botched transgressions in the mundane than she does in the extraordinary.

She threw a few books on the bed. One was opened and dropped. And then another. Her two cats fought and then raced up and down the stairs. The clock kept watch. She thought it might rain and get colder. The pages were too good to contain. What the hell did the teacher say?

You've got to have conflict, action, and resolution in each scene. That is how a story parades across a well-eaten page. She stared at her cuticles. They knew what it was to bleed into skin sliced as devoutly as chicken. She searched for a Band-Aid through a drawer filled with miscellaneous crap until she found one. Blood on the paper was a bad joke. One of the stories she gave back to a writer in the workshop had brown stains on it that plastered a more digressive or putrid thought in mind. No. It was just coffee. The words weren't dark enough. She unpacked her clothes and threw them in the washer. The clock was still waiting when she got back. If only she could have a drink. It was just after noon. She bit another cuticle and rolled it around her tongue.

Remember the masterpieces studied. Sentences stacked neatly. Coins rolled into paper homes. Conflict, action, resolution. Wouldn't it be exquisite if the skies blackened and sombered. Wouldn't it be one of those stooped days when weather does the work for the depreciated. She did just return from a rough week of note-taking and squint-provoking thoughts. She got the cats some water. Cleaned the kitty litter. The clock was ridiculous. The instructor said to digest the material. Even burn the notes— one of her favorite ways to warm herself. Lay away from writing for a while. Give it a week or so. What if she roughhoused her way back into the work and came up with words that thumbed through conflicts as if they were magazines? What if nothing came from this Tuesday? Something had to appear out of these thin-lipped clouds. She knew if she sank another shot of caffeine and popped that beer she might assemble something that at least scaffolded a dumpster of ideas.

Irritation had nothing better to do than sit on her.

Conflict: Her head is a grave full of undetonated mines.

Action: She mistakes it for another run to the bathroom.

Resolution: The clock is running laps around her sanity.

The blankets call to her. It's time for a nap. 🕒



MEG TUITE is author of a novel-in-stories, *Domestic Apparition*, a short story collection, *Bound By Blue*, and won the Twin Antlers Collaborative Poetry award for her poetry collection, *Bare Bulbs Swinging*, as well as five chapbooks of short fiction, flash, and poetic prose. She teaches at Santa Fe Community College, is a senior editor at *Connotation Press*, an associate editor at *Narrative Magazine*, fiction editor and b(OINK) zine and editor of eight anthologies. Her work has been published in numerous literary magazines, over fifteen anthologies, nominated nine times for the Pushcart Prize, five-time *Glimmer Train* finalist, placed 3rd in Bristol Prize, and Gertrude Stein award finalist. Her blog can be found at MegTuite.com

ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

CARLOS FRANCO-RUIZ

Pages: Front & Back Cover, Inside Front Cover... was born 1987 in Managua, Nicaragua. He is an artist who mainly works with painting. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Miami in 2011 and Currently lives and works in Miami, FL and Sauce, Uruguay.



ROB KIRBYSON

Pages: 27-28...

conceives visceral, often surreal ideas and renders them carefully and precisely with acrylic and oil paints, inks and pencils. There are no happy accidents. Inspiration is usually borne existentially from within although Rob also likes to take a personal skewed look at other cultural touchstones. Surfaces used are canvas, canvas board, wooden panel, aluminium sheet and electric toasters. Rob also works in magazine illustration and as a cartoonist. He has worked in independent and newsstand magazines in the USA and UK since the late 90's. Rob works from a camouflaged and secluded studio in Kinross, Scotland. Check out more of Rob's work at RobKirbyson.com



CHARMA RULAND

... Original Photo Used for Page 9 ...

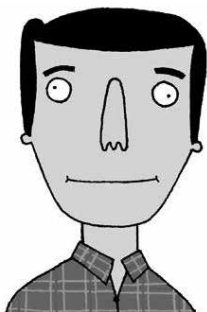
is a pinhole camera hobbyist and sometimes storyteller residing in one of the pretty bits of Appalachia. When not living in the past photographically, she's living in the present theoretically.



CHAD YENNEY

Pages: 6, 29-31, 39..

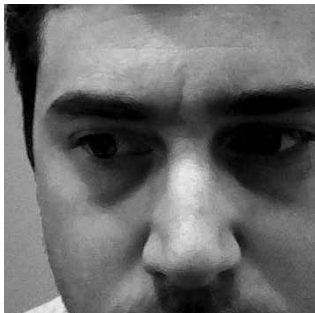
makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at computarded.com or send him love letters at computardedcollage@gmail.com.



REZA FARAZMAND

Page: 16...

draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines (PoorlyDrawnLines.com), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A collection of his cartoons titled **Poorly Draw Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories** debuted on October 6, 2015. His latest book, **Comics for a Strange World** was released on October 24th, 2017.



CHAD ROSEBURG

Pages: 2, 17, 34...

is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



CESAR VALTIERRA

Page: 36-37...

is a graphic artist. To escape the drudgery of life, he draws. He also hangs out with his fiancée Victoria, and their cats, Chubs and Pretty Boy. Check out his work at CesarValtierra.com and OrderFromKhaos.com, as well as his comic at TonyBalazo.com

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RW SPRYSZAK

Editor, THRICE Fiction...

has work which appeared in **Slipstream**, **Paper Radio**, **the Lost and Found Times**, **Mallife**, **Version90**, **Sub Rosa**, **Asylum**, and a host of other alternative magazines over the last 30 years. After a drunken hiatus his work has resurfaced in places like **A Minor Magazine** and **Peculiar Mormyrid**. He was editor of the **Fiction Review** from 1989-1991 and co-founded Thrice Publishing in 2011. He compiled and edited **So What If It's True: From the Notebooks of Lorri Jackson** and stares out the window for no reason quite often. He has no degrees, does not apply for awards, and works in a print shop where nobody knows about any of this. You can find his website at rwspryszak.com



DAVID SIMMER II

Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...

is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of **Thrice Fiction Magazine** and blogs daily at Blogography.com

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